



HARVEST

by

Lea Tassie

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For Lynn Arnold
A clear and good friend is the best of all possessions.

The harvest of a quiet eye
(William Wordsworth)

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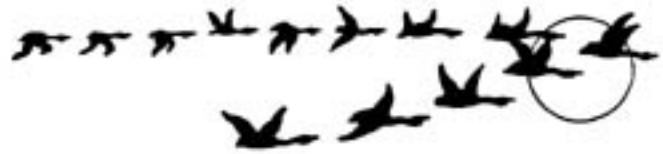
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CONCENTRATION

Hunched over my desk
dreaming a story,
seeking words,
I hear the honking of geese,
see in my mind
the long vee soaring
and, for a moment,
cannot remember whether
it is April or September.

GUARDIANS

The last thousand acres of old-growth forest on the British Columbia coast basked in April sunshine. Bald eagles, perched on cloud-tipped branches of ancient Douglas firs, preened their feathers as the last clinging shreds of morning mist burned away. From time to time, the croaking of ravens scoured the silence. The lush green of new growth on fir and cedar fronds shimmered in the tender breeze and, in the cool depths of the forest, insects and small birds flitted and soared in a frenzy of breeding and building.

The discordant snarl of engines laboring up the mountainside silenced the forest. Men and machines gathered at the last loop of an old road marking the limits of an area logged years before.

Len Burley, the foreman, craned his head back and gazed up at the nearest trees. "Christ! I haven't seen timber like that in years. The company landed a goddam gold mine when it got this license."

"For sure," said the man standing beside him. "I didn't figure the tree-huggers would ever give up on it."

"Goddam good thing Pritchard & Hill has more clout than they do. We all got families to take care of." Time the tree-huggers learned people had the right to protect their jobs.

Burley waved his hand at the Cat Skinner. "Okay, Hank, start clearing in through there." The branches of two giant cedars formed a canopy over a natural opening into the forest. "We'll extend the old road a couple hundred yards, then see how she looks."

The Cat lumbered toward the opening, its lowered blade tearing at salal and slash. Ten feet from the cedars, the engine quit, and Hank slumped over the controls.

Burley ran to the machine and reached up to shake Hank's shoulder. "What happened? You okay?"

The Cat Skinner stirred, opened his eyes, and blinked as though trying to clear them of fog. "I dunno. Guess I passed out."

"I better get the first aid man."

"No, I'm okay." Hank sat up straight and flexed his shoulders. He felt fine now. Hell, he was only twenty-seven and never a thing wrong with him his whole life. "Guess I shoulda ate more breakfast."

Hank started the engine, which coughed once and died. Grabbing at his belly, he crumpled, falling sideways. Burley caught him under the arms and eased him to the ground.

The first aid man came running at Burley's yell and examined the unconscious Cat Skinner while Burley, kneeling, looked on.

Hank sat up. He looked dazed.

"How are you, boy? What happened?"

"Same as the first time. Felt like my guts were being chewed up. Then I passed out."

The first aid man stood up. "Can't find anything but he better knock off and get to a medic. Just in case."

"Send him out in the chopper," Burley said. "Has to be something wrong with him. A guy don't pass out twice in five minutes for no reason."

Thompson, one of the fallers, tapped Burley on the shoulder. "Where you want us to start?"

Burley stared at the trees. They seemed to be staring back at him. These old forests were spooky goddam places, thick with snags and deadfalls and everything dripping with moss and lichen and ferns. Quiet as a morgue with all that moss underfoot, too. Personally, he couldn't wait till every one of the bastards was mowed down and made into lumber.

"You might as well get yourself a big one to start with. Go after that Douglas fir over there."

Burley shifted his attention to the Cat. He'd drive it himself until Hank came back or they sent in a replacement. Been a long time since he'd felt the power of a big machine under him. Keeping to schedule would net him a fat bonus and he was going to secure that bonus, come hell or high water, long as nobody got hurt.

It struck him then there might be something wrong with the electrical system in the Cat's engine. Short circuit, maybe? That could have knocked Hank out. He went off to find the mechanic.

When he came back, Thompson was getting ready to cut a springboard slot into the Douglas fir. The tree appeared to be well over two hundred feet tall and thirty-five feet around the base. The faller looked like a flea about to attack a St. Bernard.

Thompson revved his power saw and took a step toward the tree. The shrill howl of the motor died, and he toppled to the ground.

The first aid man was already heading toward the faller. "What the hell's going on?" Burley muttered. Had Thompson's saw kicked back on him?

Thompson staggered to his feet, picked up the saw and yanked the starter cord. The motor burped once before it quit, and Thompson slumped again as the first aid man reached him. Burley's gut started tying itself in knots.

By the time he and the rest of the crew gathered around Thompson, a few feet away from the Douglas fir, the faller was on his feet, his expression dazed.

"What happened?" Burley demanded.

"I don't know." Thompson's face was pale. "When I started the saw, it was like a bolt of lightning hit and I passed out. Second time it felt like I was gonna puke."

"Burley." The mechanic had joined them. "The engine on that Cat is fried. You gotta bring in a new engine or another machine."

Burley spat in disgust. "Better have a look at Thompson's saw. If I didn't know better, I'd say the goddam tree-huggers put a curse on the place."

He clambered through the salal and deadfalls around the base of the fir, scanning the heavy creviced bark, though why the hell he was bothering he couldn't say. Thompson had never got the saw within six feet of the goddam tree.

When he saw dull rusted metal, old rage burned in him. Goddam freaks! Whose taxes did they think paid their goddam welfare checks, anyway? He peered at the spike, driven in till just the head showed. Could barely see the goddam thing. Must have been hammered in back before the surrounding area had been logged.

"Get me a spike puller," he hollered to the mechanic. It wouldn't do his screwed-up schedule any good, but yanking the spike out would make him feel better.

"Okay," the mechanic said. "Len, the power saw's fried, too. What's going on?"

"You tell me. That's your job, isn't it? You tell me what fried those motors."

He was a good ten feet from the tree when the mechanic handed him the clawed metal bar and he hadn't taken more than two steps forward when the shock hit him. The bar fell from his hand as he grunted in agony, clutched his abdomen, and passed out.



Two days later, a mud-splattered four-wheel-drive truck parked at the end of the access road, well back from the abandoned Cat. A tall man, wearing horn rims and pressed tan chinos and shirt, climbed out and stood looking at the giant trees. He was enjoying this unexpected field trip. The forestry research facility had taken all his time the last few years and he'd almost forgotten what it was like to work in a real forest.

Peaceful up here, Bonner thought. Ideal place to put a cabin, away from city noise and career pressures. But he'd never be allowed to do it. A stand like this was meant for harvesting. Or for the environmentalists to play with. Not that Greenpeace had had any luck for a few years; but this was the last old-growth around.

They'd never get their hands on this forest, though. The trees were too valuable for the logging industry to ignore. And industry votes were too valuable for the government to ignore.

But Bonner's business was science, not politics. He refrained from expressing his opinions at cocktail parties, since he disliked both factions. Loggers tended to be bullheaded, superstitious rednecks and the environmentalists were emotional fanatics. Science, in its search for pure truth, had no room for emotion or prejudice.

He'd brought along sophisticated equipment, which he now unloaded. Not that he expected to find anything other than some clever new ploy by the environmentalists, though the story the Pritchard & Hill officials had told him was peculiar. The loggers blamed their problems on the spikes they'd found, which proved they were superstitious. No metal in existence could disable both engines and men. P&H had refuted any suggestion that the logging equipment was faulty, and Bonner was inclined to agree. Three power saws and a Caterpillar tractor having their motors destroyed in one morning, with no apparent reason, had to be more than just coincidence.

Pritchard & Hill had pulled the crew out, pending a thorough investigation. And, of course, they wanted an explanation yesterday.

Bonner picked up a couple of testers and a spike puller. Could be a magnetic field, he supposed, but more likely the environmentalists had wired up a complex electrical device. The only explanation for what the men had suffered was electrical shock. He walked toward the Douglas fir that had caused so much trouble.

The tree was impressive. He'd be sorry when the last of these had gone but, he reminded himself, thousands of species had died since the earth was formed and millions more would go before the sun cooled. And by then man would have conquered some new planet—perhaps several—near some new sun. He climbed around the trunk of the patriarch until he saw the rusted spike, almost hidden in the rough texture of the bark. The spike looked as if it had been there for years, probably since before the surrounding area had been logged. A woodpecker, foraging on the trunk above, took off with a flash of red wing feathers and vanished into the dark sanctuary of a balsam fir forty feet into the stand of timber.

Bonner set up the first tester. He'd get an idea what the spike was all about, then pull it so he could get it examined in the lab. Spikes weren't likely to be the problem, but he had to be sure.

As he raised the tester toward the tree, his body convulsed, and he fell unconscious at the base of the fir.

He came to, face pressed into a damp mat of needles and decaying leaves and tried to sit up. His body ached; his stomach felt as though an army of mice had been gnawing at it. He lay still, hoping the feeling would pass and wishing he'd brought an assistant. But the loggers' story had seemed nothing more than mass hysteria. He'd been sure that a dispassionate scientific approach

would quickly resolve the mystery.

Bonner sat up. Better. At least his head was clearing. A few more moments and he stood up, leaning on a moss-covered log for support. He half expected the fir to zap him again, but he felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing. When he felt more or less normal, he started pulling away the duff from around the base of the trunk.

Nothing there. The decaying matter looked as though it hadn't been disturbed for a thousand years and maybe it hadn't. The tree could easily be that old. No sign of wires, no evidence that anything had been buried nearby.

He walked away from the edge of the forest, leaned against the hood of his truck. What in the name of sweet reason could have done that to him?

The only answer that came from the brooding trees was the twitter of birds and, from above, the scream of an eagle.

He decided to risk another experiment. Leaving his equipment behind, he walked back to the Douglas fir, then ranged along the edge of the stand until he found an opening into the trees. The loggers had checked every tree for two or three hundred yards along the periphery, finding a dozen or so rusty spikes, but they hadn't investigated beyond that point. If only those trees on the edge had been booby-trapped, it might be possible to get around them, to log everything else in the stand. Pritchard & Hill would be happy with that solution.

But Bonner wouldn't. His training rebelled against leaving the basic problem unsolved. There was a force here he'd never encountered before. He had to find out what it was, how it worked, how to control it.

Thirty feet into the trees he found a small cool glade, waist deep in salal and ferns. On the other side was a massive western red cedar, a sure target for the loggers, if they could penetrate this far. Bonner forced his way into the brush. On the third step, a shock wave ripped through him and left his unconscious body sagging into the resilient salal. Above him, birds sang and went on with their nest-building as if Bonner had never existed.



The chief executive officer of Pritchard & Hill leaned back in his black leather swivel chair. "What do you think, George? Do we give up or do we keep fighting?"

The chief operations officer walked to the window and gazed at the sea of skyscrapers, appreciating the symmetry of rectangular glass and concrete thrusting into the sky. "Giving up means we lose the money we poured into Bonner's research over the last three months."

"It would also cancel out the bad publicity we've been getting," the CEO said, referring to the environmentalists' latest scheme to save the stand of timber. He grimaced. "But I hate to let those bastards win." Why couldn't they see that the company provided jobs for thousands of people, even them?

"None of them knows what a bottom line is," George said. "Bonner thinks we're made of money. He's obsessed with that old-growth."

"I'm obsessed with it, too. We paid for it. But we can't afford to give him anymore unless he can guarantee results."

"He can't," George said. "I say let's quit while we still have the chance to show a profit this year. If P&H goes under, guys like Bonner will be out of a job. What does it take to teach these people that production and a sound economy are the most important things?"

"Nothing short of disaster," said the CEO, "something that would put the world three

centuries back to pre-industrial times."

"God! That's too high a price to pay for wisdom."

"It won't happen, George. We've always safeguarded our shareholders' income and our employees' jobs. We just won't do it with this particular stand. You can notify the government that we relinquish the license."

George paused at the door. "Did you see those reports of something similar happening in the Amazon rain forests?"

"I read them. It's either hysteria or the environmentalists down there have taken lessons from the ones up here. In any case, it's no business of ours."



Two months later, three dozen members of the Society for the Preservation of Ecological Reserves, exultant and eager, prepared to enter the old-growth forest.

"Look at those gorgeous trees!" said Jim Graves, the leader. "They're safe at last!"

"We can thank the newspapers," Mark Darwin said. "The publicity helped a lot."

"We'll need more," Graves said, "when we appeal to the public for cash to build paths through here."

"I'm still not convinced that's the best approach," Darwin said. "If we're going to properly guard these trees for the future, I believe we should limit our interference to taking photographs and publishing them."

"Nonsense! I want to see thousands of people going through here every year. You can't get messages across with snapshots. People need to actually see these trees, touch them, walk among them. They won't do that much harm."

Darwin was silent for a moment, remembering a time five years before when he'd come here on his own to spike trees, anticipating that the rumor of clearcutting might be true. Every time he'd tried to hammer in a spike, he'd found himself sprawled on the ground. He'd come away, confused and frightened, his pockets still full of spikes.

He pushed the memory to the back of his mind. He'd probably dreamed the whole thing. Just the same, he could not help asking, "You think there's anything to what they said about danger to men and equipment?"

"There's no denying something destroyed the loggers' engines. The rest is probably guilt-inspired superstition. Those men were trying to rape the forest. That's why we're using only hand tools: picks and axes and hand saws."

The Society members began moving into the trees. Within minutes, seventeen of them lay unconscious on the forest floor.



Richard Bonner stood, once again, at the edge of the old-growth timber. He was alone, equipped only with a compulsion to penetrate the mystery that had monopolized his mind for five months. In this first week of September the sun was still hot, but a tang of decay scented the air, indicating a slowing of the earth's metabolism in preparation for the season of hibernation and renewal. Yet, in spite of the season, fresh, green, one- or two-inch shoots of young Douglas fir had sprouted up all along the edge of the old timber. Strange. But no doubt the old-growth

offered them protection from the weather.

He took off his watch, the only metal that he wore, and put it on the seat of the truck. He had even gone so far as to have his gold fillings removed and replaced with plastic compound.

At the edge of the forest some strange power destroyed motors and disabled men who carried metal tools to within a few feet of the trees. A short distance inside, the force was more powerful and attacked everything metal, from fly snaps to chronometers, from earrings to hand saws. The environmentalists had fled, not just shaken, but terrified. Bonner himself had been knocked unconscious on every one of his experimental forays into the forest.

He walked forward, clad in cloth and rubber and fear, a human brain his only tool. And nobody paying him for his time or expertise. If the trees didn't strike him down today, it would prove that men could enter the forest as he did now. He didn't think many would wish to, but that was unimportant. What mattered was finding the truth and harnessing the strange properties of this place. If it took the rest of his life, he intended to do that.

Just as well everyone else had been frightened away. He wanted no one disturbing the forest until he'd learned its secret.

He reached the glade he had visited before and paused, his nerve failing. But he had to know. If there was any way of knowing.

On he went, struggling through the salal, climbing over deadfalls, his head sometimes brushing the moss that hung from bent and venerable limbs. About a quarter of a mile into the forest, he came upon another glade.

This one was perhaps a hundred yards in diameter, lush with salmonberry, salal, and young saplings. A monarch butterfly, soaring and swooping, drew his gaze to two small west coast deer fifty feet away. Bonner moved forward, seeking the easiest path.

Another monarch landed on a sapling nearby and Bonner saw a dozen more perched there.

Odd, he thought. They should have flown south weeks ago. Why were the monarchs still here? The cold weather would kill them. Unless...

The thought was so chilling he had to stand still to compose himself. He was letting this damn forest get to him. To think that the power guarding the trees could also protect butterflies was madness. These were merely a few rogue monarchs, and they would soon die.

After twenty paces, he looked up again. The deer were standing in the same place, watching him. He waved his arms at them. The doe flicked an ear and began grazing, her mate following suit. Irritated, Bonner stumbled another ten paces toward the animals, the breath harsh in his throat. What was the matter with them? Didn't they recognize a predator when they saw one?

The deer were acting strangely and, for some reason he couldn't explain, this angered him. He looked around for a weapon, something long enough that if they kicked at him in panic, he'd be out of reach. Seeing nothing else, he grabbed a stalk of salal and tugged, but the wiry, resilient stem resisted his efforts. He knelt and tried to dig around the root with his hands. The pounding of his heart and the sweat rolling down his face increased his irritation.

The salal refused to be dislodged. Cursing, Bonner rose to his feet and yelled at the deer. They looked at him, then went back to grazing with an air of complete indifference.

A spasm of rage left Bonner trembling, his face flushed. Gradually he controlled his emotions, now angry with himself. Never before had he allowed anything to shake his detached attitude.

It was stupid to be emotional about a couple of deer. Naturally, with no humans able to enter this forest, the deer were unafraid. He'd just go around them, across the glade to the huge red cedar he'd been aiming for.

The craggy cedar looked as if it had been growing there forever. Bonner worked his way around it, looking for spikes, for anything that seemed out of place. But as carefully as he searched, moving under the shelter of the low-hanging fronds, he found nothing.

He stared at the tree. Did he dare touch it? Hesitant, he placed a hand against the bark. Instead of the disabling jolt he'd feared, he felt nothing. He closed his eyes for a minute, then put his other hand on the tree.

Nothing. Nothing but the sense of a life force as mysterious as those distant galaxies he would never see. Bonner felt insignificant, almost invisible.

He snapped off a couple of small fronds and clawed out a piece of bark and put them in his pocket. Later, he'd examine them in the lab, but he doubted the results would differ from the tests he'd conducted earlier. Perfectly normal samples that contained the usual properties and growth patterns of a cedar.

Bonner returned to the center of the glade. The deer were a few feet away, still ignoring him. He gazed up at the impenetrable depths of the blue sky and, to his astonishment, found himself pleading. *What is it? Why is this happening?* The trained reflexes of his mind mocked him for letting his emotions lead him into primitive reactions.

He railed at the trees. "You have no right to do this! I need the truth. I must have it!"

A breeze rustled the fronds of the cedar, and a couple of the older, taller trees creaked in response to the movement. Another monarch butterfly settled on the top of a twenty-foot sapling. The deer tossed their heads and lowered them again to graze.

Bonner retreated, reluctant to leave, yet feeling less like an intruder with each step he took toward the clear-cut slopes outside. As he turned the key in his truck, he noticed that the young Douglas fir shoots were now nearly six inches high. The forest reclaiming the land? He imagined it moving, inexorable, over the earth, destroying all of man's accomplishments, blanketing once again the mountains and valleys and plains.

Scientific detachment returned. Such a thing was impossible. Mankind reigned. If he couldn't penetrate the mystery and regain mastery of the last stand of old-growth timber in British Columbia, then someone else would do it. Given time and resources, every puzzle could be solved; every natural power was capable of subjugation.

Anyway, the fast-growing saplings could probably be explained by nature's tendency to quickly recoup any major loss in a particular species. Even humans unconsciously obeyed this natural law, rapidly producing babies after a war that took hundreds of thousands of young men.

Bonner started the truck and eased it along the rutted road toward the city. He glanced out at the bare slopes. Stunned, he realized that they were no longer bare. Two-inch-high saplings had sprung up everywhere. The bare hills were covered in a mat of green.

He stopped the truck, awe and resentment vying for control of his mind. Even as he watched, green sprouts seemed to thrust out of the ground, stretch up to meet the sun.

"How can you do this? How far are you going to go?" he whispered. Nature was predictable, controllable. It did not possess intelligence and it certainly did not fight back.

Maybe he'd only imagined the rapid growth? Maybe those young shoots had been there before, and he just hadn't noticed?

Bonner threw the truck into gear and fled, not daring to look back.

OCTOBER

Outside,
rain drizzles from grey, rusted skies,
whispers damp dirges
on dripping cedar bough,
pale, leafless alder.

Inside,
wet wood hisses in the flames,
spitting on dead summer.

THE BUTTER TART WAR

He was buying birdseed in a pet store when I first saw him, and my heart thumped so loudly I knew he was the man for me. I'd always been attracted to big, broad-shouldered men with warm smiles, and I had a hunch his would sparkle like champagne. His hair was black and wavy, reminding me of twisted licorice sticks. And, though the paunch and adorable double chin indicated he might be courting heart problems, they looked good on him. Dumping cat food into my basket as I went, I contrived to trip over him.

His smile was everything I'd hoped for. The apologies became a conversation, which continued in the coffee shop next door. He told me that he was a master chef and invited me to his apartment for dinner. "What's your favorite dessert?"

"Peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies."

"Oh dear. Could you possibly live without them? I'm highly allergic to peanuts. And chocolate, to my sorrow, gives me hives."

Bad news. Though I restricted myself to eating the cookies perhaps once every month or two, I adored the taste and I'd hoped a master chef could produce some even more delectable than those I bought at the grocery store.

"Of course, I can." Poor man, not able to eat either peanuts or chocolate!

I knew my instincts had been right when, after a candle-lit dinner of Cornish game hen spiced to perfection and basted with wine and butter, he presented me with two fresh, flaky tarts on a lace-covered gold-edged plate.

"These are butter tarts," he said. "You'll love them."

He was right. To my surprise, they were far better than the cookies. Deliciously rich. Ambrosial, even. Two months later I married my King of Hearts.

At first life was idyllic. He adored my cats; I began feeding his birds. He told me he'd always yearned for a tall, thin woman of his own to cook for, which suited me perfectly; I could barely boil water. His greatest joy was making gourmet meals for me to eat, and I loved him far too much to insult him by leaving anything on my plate. By the end of the first year, I was thirty pounds overweight.

The second year saw the peach fuzz of love begin to turn brown. I noticed he no longer shaved twice a day. He said I put toilet paper on the roller the wrong way around. He didn't like my family or my friends; he apparently had neither.

He even accused me of being thoughtless when I bought a little bag of peanuts for myself. "Suppose I accidentally touched them, or the bag they came in?" he said. "That would make me ill. It might even kill me." Needless to say, I immediately put the bag of peanuts in the garbage and scrubbed my mouth in case he decided to kiss me.

But he continued to give me fresh butter tarts every day and the combination of my sugar addiction and my desire to make him happy rendered them impossible to resist. I gained more weight, bought more clothes, found new ways to avoid looking at myself in the mirror.

It was irritating, of course, to discover that no matter how much he ate—and he ate a lot—my King of Hearts never added an ounce to the 300 pounds he'd been when we married. I often had to remind myself that not all of us are blessed with perfect metabolism. His canaries didn't have a problem, either; they remained svelte and sang from dawn till dusk. The cats, on the other hand, grew fat on filet and pheasant and lay around on soft pillows, no longer indulging in the mouse carnage that had been their life work when they were subsisting on canned cat food.

One day I came face to face with myself in a mirror I hadn't anticipated. There was too much of me. A thousand butter tarts too much. Something had to be done.

That evening, I said, "Darling, please don't give me so much food. None of my clothes fit any more. I must buy another whole new wardrobe."

"You don't need new clothes, my precious Queen of Hearts. Quit your job and stay home so I can look after you twenty-four hours a day, as the Fates intended me to do. I know of a store that sells lovely silk caftans."

Just what I needed: a silk tent to lumber around in. I'd already given up my bowling team and reading club because he wanted us to spend more time together. "I'm serious. It's hard work packing around all this fat."

He piled my plate like a logger's. "The more weight you gain," he said, "the more of you there is to love."

I melted. What woman could resist such tender passion? Besides, I've always loved food and he was a marvelous cook. Then there was Mother's voice, in the back of my head, telling me to clean up my plate because the starving children in China would love to have the leftovers.

I tried to think of a way out of the trap, but I couldn't bear to hurt him by spurning his love offering of butter tarts. It might even take away his pleasure in eating butter tarts himself. He liked them so much that he'd pop a whole tart into his mouth and swallow it before I'd taken my first bite. Four would have disappeared off his plate before I finished the second bite. No, I couldn't be so selfish as to refuse his butter tarts when it gave him such happiness to watch me eat. Nonetheless, my pride went on fighting my inner glutton.

One evening, after searching his cookbooks for a recipe I could manage without ruining it, I prepared a fresh fruit salad with a piquant touch of ginger in the yogurt and honey dressing. "I've decided to specialize in desserts," I said, hoping that my concoctions would be so luscious that he'd forget about butter tarts.

My King of Hearts gulped the salad with every evidence of delight, then went to the kitchen and brought back a plate of butter tarts. "Your salad was very tasty," he said, "but we must have the tarts you love so much. After all, what better way to celebrate the day we met?"

The man was incredibly romantic. "The king of hearts, he made some tarts," I said. "I think I'll start calling you my King of Tarts."

He smiled his heart-stopping smile. "My precious! Making you happy with good food has given my life such depth and meaning. I will allow no one, not even a Knave of Hearts, to steal away your daily butter tart morsel."

My next ploy was to eat so much of the main course—a delectable roast of pork, with real gravy—that I could honestly plead satiety when he brought out the butter tarts. He looked crushed and, impossible though it seemed, the load of guilt in my heart was even heavier than the pork loin, gravy, and buttery mashed potatoes in my stomach.

He continued to make butter tarts, humming happily. I continued to eat them, reminding myself that I was, after all, being unselfish. But did unselfishness have to carry such a heavy price?

I confided my woes to a friend who said I'd got things the wrong way round. In her opinion, it was my King of Hearts who was being selfish in demanding that I eat sweet things when I didn't want to, or rather, when I knew I shouldn't. "If he really loved you," she said, "he would respect your right to choose what goes into your mouth."

I hugged my King of Tarts that evening and announced in a gentle but firm tone that I was giving up butter tarts because I wanted to lose weight.

"But you love them so! Surely you can allow yourself such tiny treats."

Hardly tiny, at 300 calories per tart. "Actually," I said, reckless in my desperation, "I'm bored with them."

"Bored!" His expression was one of hurt amazement. "Impossible!"

He went out to the kitchen and made a fresh batch, placing one beside my coffee cup after dinner. I thought of the waste, the cost and his feelings and ate it, hating myself with every delicious bite.

By the end of the third year, I couldn't even see my toes. To say I looked like a blimp was being kind. I had no lap left for the cats to sit on and his canaries' dawn caroling was getting on my nerves. I told my King of Hearts that I was positively, emphatically, absolutely dead serious about giving up desserts forever. I intended to lose a hundred pounds or kill myself.

He chuckled at my humor and made more butter tarts. I was eating so little else I couldn't help gorging on them. The sweetness was perfectly offset by bitter resentment.

The next time he took a pan of tarts from the oven, I gathered up my courage and said, "I'm afraid you'll have to enjoy them by yourself, because I'm not going to eat any." When he put one beside my coffee, I offered it to the animals. The canaries chirped; the cats yawned. I took the tart to the kitchen and put it in the garbage.

There were tears in his eyes. "How can you be so cruel when I love you so much? But I know you'll come to your senses. Life is short and love is rare; taste as much of both as you can."

For a couple of weeks, things went smoothly. Each evening he'd ask whether I wanted a butter tart, and each evening I said no. I lost five pounds and felt on top of the world, in control of my life. I'd won the battle. I preened in front of the mirror and imagined how thin I'd be in another six months.

Then, one night after dinner, he brought a tray and set it on the end table beside me. "I thought you'd like these for a change."

I stared at the pecan tart, decorated with whole pecans and a swirl of whipped cream, resting on a heart-shaped serviette beside my coffee. My mouth watered, my body yearned for the sugar buzz. But I knew that eating the tart meant I'd lose not only this battle, but the war as well. If I left him and moved across town, he'd deliver butter tarts to my door. If I moved across the country, he'd send them in the mail. If I escaped to the Andes, he'd send them by llama train.

Now I knew that the sweetest love could have a bitter aftertaste. There was only one thing to be done. It would take a great deal of thought to free both of us from the trap of addiction, but what did I have to lose?

Three weeks later I said, "I think it's time I learned how to make butter tarts. You've been working so hard to make me happy, it's only fair that I take my turn."

"But it's my job to look after *you*," he said, looking worried. "Besides, you can't cook. At least, not nearly as well as I can. Why not let me handle it? You know how much I love cooking."

"I'm not a master chef but perhaps I'll surprise you."

I carefully lined his tart tins with pastry, which I'd made with peanut oil instead of corn oil. I thickened the sugar and raisin filling with ground peanuts instead of flour, poured it in and hid my recipe. I put the mixing things in the dishwasher and wiped the tins, then used oven mitts to put them in the oven so that my fingerprints wouldn't be all over them.

When the tarts came out of the oven, I took one look at them and burst into tears. I couldn't do it. I simply couldn't do it.

I dumped the tarts in the garbage, scrubbed the pans, ripped up my recipe, and started all over again.

My tarts were lop-sided and slightly scorched but completely harmless — they contained not an atom of peanut. Or chocolate.

He came home from work, saw the butter tarts on the counter and gave me a brave smile. He downed the first tart in one bite and took another. My heart aching with despair over the war I'd lost, I ate one myself.

After the second tart, he said, "You're wonderful to do this for me, but would you mind if I gave you a few pointers on how to make them?"

He opened the cupboard door, gasped, then turned to me, horror in his eyes. "You... you ..." He wheezed, clawed at his chest, and crashed to the floor.

I knelt and felt for his pulse. But he was gone. For a moment I was torn between grief and relief. Then curiosity overcame both emotions.

What had he seen in the cupboard? What had frightened him so much he'd had a heart attack? I pulled the door open wider and looked.

Darn it all, I'd forgotten to get rid of the jar of peanuts and the peanut oil.

THEY SAY

They say

Black is bad,
death and despair,
widow's weeds,
holes in the sky,
gloom and grief,
oblivion.

I say

Black is good,
dawn about to break,
sleek cat slinking
off to new adventures,
berries in cream,
brother raven standing guard,
diamonds and coal.
Black is warm and safe
under the covers,
keeping out the world.

I say, too

Black is the color
of my true love's hair.

SECRETS

Sally's son, Robbie, died in November, just after his fourth birthday. A severe bout of influenza followed by a fever ended his short, sweet life only minutes before the helicopter arrived. The child had to be pried from Sally's arms and, afterward, when the nauseous blur of the drug the doctor gave her had lifted, the world seemed an alien place. She felt as if her body, weightless and insubstantial, were trapped inside a transparent glass bubble that rendered her invisible and mute.

She could not cry, could only summon the strength to say to her husband, Rodman, "If you'd called for the medic earlier this wouldn't have happened." She'd asked him to do so several times, but he had delayed, insisting that Robbie would be fine.

He struck her across the face and shouted, "If you'd looked after him better, he wouldn't have got sick! It's your fault my son is dead." The blow seemed to come from far away and she felt no pain, though she spit blood for days afterward.

Her heart was dust. The sounds and movements around her came enclosed in separate moments, meaningless in their unconnected clarity, and glanced off the surface of her trapped mind. Alone, she tramped the bleak promontory where the lighthouse stood, gulls wheeling and crying overhead, not feeling the rain soak through her clothes nor caring when winter gales threatened to sweep her into the crashing waves below.

Rodman had married her when he learned she was carrying his child, though her father warned her against it: Sally was too young at sixteen, Rodman too old at twice her age. But her thoughts and energy were concentrated on the child inside her, on the desire Rodman had wakened in her body. She left, heart bright and beating, the lighthouse where she had lived with her widowed father all her life. It had been easy to settle into the familiar pattern of isolation with Rodman, who worked farther down the B.C. coast, on a light station anchored to a bony finger of land jutting into the sea beyond lushly forested mountains.

Groceries and mail were brought by supply boat or helicopter and Sally dug a small garden in the thin soil behind the small house, fertilizing it with seaweed. Rodman was a silent, withdrawn man given to sullen bursts of temper, and Sally spent hours, first alone, then with Robbie, exploring the windswept rocks or walking the driftwood-choked beach at the forest's edge. Sometimes a lonely fisherman came, looking for company, and she would clean the house and cook complicated meals, eager for different voices, grateful for a breath of exotic air from outside.

After the death of her son, even these visits could not crack her transparent shell. Rodman did not try; he now slept on a cot in the lighthouse. To punish her, he said, for being a bad mother. People and events, everything outside the glass bubble, seemed skewed and unreal.

She began keeping a journal, writing dates and times of storms, noting when potato or pea sprouts pushed through the earth. She listed birds that visited the light station, passing fish boats, ships. On nights when she could not sleep, reading over the dull pages gave her a vague sense of accomplishment; life was real even if she could not feel it.

In the spring a couple moved onto the long-abandoned farm that lay a mile inland from the beach. They came down the twisting overgrown trail one day and said they would sell eggs and vegetables.

Rodman said, "Those people are losers; be lucky if they don't starve to death. But I'd like fresh eggs. You can walk up there once a week and get some."

The prospect of having somewhere to go pleased her and a shaft of guilt chipped the glass bubble; how could she feel pleasure when Robbie was dead?

She was nervous the first time she walked up the forest trail, but Ilsa and Karl welcomed her, their voices holding no trace of anger or accusation. Their sixteen-year-old son David said little but smiled often. She could not stop looking at him; he was tall and well-made, like Robbie might have been at the same age.

Soon she began staying for an hour, sometimes a whole afternoon. When he wasn't working outside or studying, David taught her to play cribbage, talking to her as easily as the grownups did, and the glass bubble thinned enough to let in a little sunshine. She wrote in the journal, 'I went for eggs today. David and I played crib, and I won three games out of four. Karl and Ilsa told me all the wonderful things they plan to do with their farm.'

One day in July, David took her into his room to see his rock and mineral samples, saying he wanted to become a geologist someday. They stood at the shelves and, as he described the properties of each sample, she became aware of his body close behind her shoulder and his breath on her cheek. Her blood warmed and she thought, I could pat his arm or ruffle his hair, as if he were Robbie grown up. The urge was so strong she felt David could read her thoughts, but he was frowning, apparently absorbed in a piece of rough quartz. She turned away, the reminder of what she had lost scraping like a sharp knife against the glass bubble, and she said, "I must go home now."

"I'll walk with you across the clearing."

She stumbled once, almost dropping the eggs, and he reached out to steady her, taking her hand and holding it until they reached the edge of the forest.

"See you next week," he said and turned back.

She went on down the path, deaf to the chatter of sparrows and juncos in the trees. David had held her hand to protect her, like Robbie would have if he'd lived. At home, tears falling as she remembered the touch of her son's small hand in hers, she wrote about David in the journal.

The next week he said, "I'll show you where I found some of my rocks." She followed him through thick salal and towering Douglas firs up the steep-sided mountain. He was as sure-footed as a goat on the narrow trail and slippery stones. Near a high rock face, a stream bubbling at its foot, they sat on a mossy log under the fragrant boughs of a leaning cedar. Sparrow song and sighing breezes made music so serene that it penetrated the veneer of her glass bubble. Amazed, she felt the kiss of the breeze, the caress of the sun, heard the beating of her own heart. Those things she had once taken refuge in, the ceaseless roar of waves against the cliffs below the lighthouse and the cold, driving winter winds, now seemed harsh.

They talked about the rock face and the rushing stream and what he'd learned from them. When it was time to go, he helped her up and stood very close, looking down at her, his eyes gentle. An odd expression on his face, he bent and brushed her lips with his. Her body tingled and, as she stared at him, again the thought came that Robbie might have looked like this at sixteen, might have given her a quick kiss like that.

She said, "I think we'd better go," and led the way down the trail, trembling. They walked across the clearing to her forest path, holding hands as before, and after saying goodbye, she slowed her pace, clinging to the memory of his feather-light kiss against her lips. He was so sweet, so young, and in her reveries, Robbie wore his face. In the journal that night, she tried to describe how she felt but it was hard to find the right words.

The following week it rained, and she played four-handed crib with Kurt, Ilsa and David, ate cookies and even laughed. Whenever she looked at David her heart beat a little faster and she

hoped it wouldn't rain next time, so they could go to his place by the stream. He might touch her again, letting her taste the bittersweet pain of imagining that it was Robbie showing his love for her, his mother.

In mid-August the sun shone, the air sultry, and David said, "I'm going collecting; you can come if you like."

She scrambled up the trail behind him and balanced precariously on the wet, mossy stones in the little creek while she helped look for rocks and he taught her the names of some of the ferns and berry bushes. Afterward, they sat side by side on the mossy log and inspected the haul.

David looked at her, gaze intense, and put his hand over hers. After a moment he touched her lips with his, warm, soft, tentative. She was breathless, tingling, her nipples hard against her shirt. Because I'm cold, she thought, because I'm startled, but the image of Robbie grown up wavered and dissolved.

"David, you mustn't. I think of you as my son."

"Your son! You're like a lost little girl, not a mother. It makes me want to look after you."

A lost little girl. Perhaps, after all, that's what she was, a little girl with nowhere to go and no one to love. And no one to love her.

She stood up. "It's time we went back."

When she'd collected the eggs from Ilsa, David went with her across the clearing and a little way into the trees, far enough so that they couldn't be seen. "Please don't tell Ilsa or Karl we kissed," she said, "they wouldn't like it."

"I won't," he promised and kissed her again before she could stop him.

Sally put her hand on his arm, holding him at bay. The eager look on his face darkened to a frown. "I promise, too, David. It will be our little secret."

The warm glow of his kiss, laced with the mutter of thunder from an oddly clear sky, lasted all the way home. The glass bubble thickened, as it always did when she was near Rodman and the lighthouse. Alone inside her protective cage, she thought about the kiss and David's innocent face, as distant as the star on the horizon. The last of the sunset edged the dark gray waves in fire.

Was it wrong to let him kiss her? It seemed merely spontaneous affection. She felt alive when she was with David. She could hear his breath, taste his words, see him almost as clearly as once she could see the whole world. With him beside her, she could smell the cedar, feel the icy cold kiss of the mountain stream on her fingers, the earth breathing beneath her feet.

On her next visit, she and David went up the mountain and again sat under the leaning cedar tree. After they had talked for a while, his cool fingers brushed over her nipples, the thrill making her gasp.

"Does that feel good?" His face was serious, intent, as though her answer might give him knowledge that would be precious for a lifetime.

She was alone in the bubble, chilled and shaking. This was nothing to do with Robbie, had never been to do with Robbie. This was something else. But her body had not felt so vital, so vibrant, for years.

"Sally?" he said. "Sally, are you all right?"

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"Why not?" He squeezed her hand. "Who's it hurting?"

Maybe it didn't matter if they touched like this. He was young and she could teach him a little, perhaps. She would feel the sun on her shoulders, his hand on her skin, be alive for a little while each week. But, through the scarred glass of the bubble, his face seemed distant, unreal.

She let him caress the bare breasts under her shirt and stroke her back, wanting his tender,

deliberate hands to go on touching her forever. She leaned forward, melting against him. He put her hand inside his shirt, against the warmth of his skin and the throbbing of his blood and breath, the small hard nipples strange under her hand, and they sat and held each other, not speaking.

She wrote about David's kisses in the journal, reliving the way they felt. She was hiding the diary now, though it seemed unimaginable that Rodman would read it; he had such contempt for the written word. And she waited, dreaming, for each egg day when she could be with David again, and hated Rodman when he said, "We don't need eggs; haven't you looked in the fridge? Besides, I want you to stand the next watch for me. I have to do some repairs."

She continued to walk up to the farm almost every week. The winter was cold and wet, the wind penetrating even into the mountain sanctuary. The bite of rain added piquancy to the touch of David's chilled but determined fingers on the hot, shrinking skin of her breasts. Her hands were often numb and awkward as they sought, through jacket zipper and shirt buttons, the heat of his thin chest.

One day when it was very cold and they were sitting on the log with their arms around each other only to keep warm, he said, "On the first sunny spring day, will you take your shirt off so I can see what you look like?"

"Yes, if you will, too."

Her body quivered as she imagined seeing his body, feeling it against her own. Later, after she hurried home through the fine drizzle, she recorded their promise in the journal and wrote, "What will it be like to lie with David, to feel the sweetness of love and..." The nib of her pen slid off the page and she turned away.

Two days later Rodman stood over her, the journal clutched in one fist, his face contorted with rage. "You filthy bitch! You're never going near that place again. And I'm going to beat that little bastard to a pulp."

She shrank against the wall, terrified that Rodman would hit her. She thought about David and their touching and the private mountain retreat and said, "But he's only a boy. What can that mean to you?"

Rodman yelled, "Never mind the goddam kid! You're not fit to live, you're an animal."

The glass between her and Rodman's clenched fists thickened and hardened, separating her from fear and the sound of his rage, plunging her once again into the farther depths of a dead, dark world.

Late that night, hearing Rodman at the radio telephone, she crept to the head of the stairs to listen.

"...should send for the cops."

A short silence. "You mean they'll blame her because she's an adult and he's just a kid?"

He must be talking to Harry, his buddy down the coast. But on the radio telephone where all the world could hear?

Another silence. "Yeah, well, she's likely leading him on. She's been weird ever since my boy died."

No, not weird. Lonely. A lonely little girl. A rush of anger brought her to her feet. Then Rodman's voice again.

"Like you say, I guess I'll just have to keep a close eye on her. Thanks for the advice."

The back door closed. He'd gone to his cot in the lighthouse. Her anger shriveled and she trudged back to the bedroom, exhaustion dragging her feet across the carpet.

The next morning, she sat alone in the house, aching for her lost secrets, and looked at the

journal. She tore out the pages so carefully written and burned them.

The glass bubble was hard, tight, unbreakable. She sat smothering in her thoughts, desperate, afraid to reach out, waiting for someone to reach in.

After three weeks she could bear it no longer. Quaking but determined, she left the house while Rodman was working on the light and crept long the littered beach until she reached the forest. When she entered the farmhouse, Kurt and Ilsa both smiled and clucked over her. Why had she kept away so long? Had she been ill?

Grasping at this excuse, she nodded. A bad cold: she hadn't wanted them to catch it. If Rodman thought she was terrible to let David kiss her, Ilsa and Karl would too. She couldn't tell David what had happened; he would think she'd broken her promise about keeping their secret and he might be angry.

After coffee and a few games of cribbage, David said, "Come to the rock face with me; I've found something new."

"Button up your coats," Ilsa said, with a motherly smile for both of them. "You don't want to catch cold again. It looks like rain, too."

In the sanctuary, David climbed to the top of the rock face and said, "Come up here; this is where I found the rhodonite."

She struggled up, her feet sliding on the moss, knelt beside him and admired the pink-streaked black stone. It was bliss to be here again, to be with him, to know that soon he would touch her, bring her to life.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I missed you."

She raised her face, seeking the healing warmth of his mouth.

"You filthy bitch!" Rodman, face red and fists clenched at his side, stood at the edge of the stream, thirty feet below, glaring up at her. "Get down. Now!"

She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

"All right, if that's the way you want it. But you'll be sorry." Rodman lunged into the stream, jumped from stone to stone to the rock face, climbed almost to the top. Reached out and grabbed Sally's arm.

"No!" Sally screamed. The glass bubble shattered. Cold, clean air poured over her.

She stared at Rodman's face, finally seeing it whole through the broken shards, seeing her life ebbing away in dark gray waves. Looked up at David and saw a teenager, a stranger.

She wrenched her arm away, pushed at Rodman's shoulders with both hands. "Leave me alone!"

Rodman slipped, fell backwards, bounced off a granite crag into the creek. He lay still, blood gushing from his head into the clear water spiraling down toward the sea.

The stream thundered over jagged boulders. Rodman's lifeless eyes stared up at the branches overhead.

"My God," David said, "I think he's dead." He scrambled down, bent over Rodman's body, then rose, his face white.

"I didn't mean..." Sally whispered.

"I know you didn't." David came back up the path and stood beside her. "How did he know you were here?"

"I wrote about us in my journal. He found it."

He shook his head. "You broke your promise."

"I'm sorry, David. I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have let you touch me, either." She waited for the glass bubble to paralyze her heart, to mute the pain of Robbie's death, her

loneliness, Rodman's hatred, but it did not come. The pain continued, sharp, punishing, alive.
Oh, so alive.

David looked at her for a long moment. "If you stay and teach me everything there is to know, I won't ever tell anyone else that you pushed him."

Sally stared at him, trying to understand.

He took her hand, the light in his eyes strange and bright. "It'll be our little secret, right?"



NOVEMBER

The night wind bites
with sharp little teeth;
dry leaves skulk
across empty pavement.
Surf glitters under a leering moon
and thunders over the sluggish rocks
with icy regularity,
the slow goose step
of relentless winter.

DECEMBER

Pale winter moon wanes
to a white dawn of snowflakes:
A Christmas rose blooms.

THE CRYSTAL STAR

Once upon a time, when the Earth was young, a tribe of Ice Fairies left the glacial heights of the Western Mountains and settled in a gentle green valley. They found the perfect home, a small grotto branching far back into the hillside. Tall poplars, whose leaves in summer whispered the latest news, hid the entrance. Nearby, a spring bubbled out of a sandstone bluff and trickled, lingering here and there in clear pools, to the creek meandering along the valley floor.

Cantala squirmed in her hiding place of snow-laden grass and peered at the first pool below the spring. Wasn't Queen Melvina *ever* going to finish her bath? The queen seemed to like washing her silvery hair and wings in the frosty water even more than Cantala did.

The young fairy sighed. How much longer must she stay out of sight? The queen would be angry if she knew Cantala had run away from her job of weaving December snowflakes. But Cantala's snowflakes were always lopsided and Oriana, the head weaver, scolded her constantly. This morning Cantala had decided to play hooky. That would bring a tongue-lashing, but no worse than for making crooked snowflakes.

Everyone but the queen wove snowflakes in winter. Cantala knew that long, long ago, when Emrys, the wise old wizard, gave the Crystal Star to Melvina's great-grandmother, the fairies promised to make snowflakes in winter and dew in summer so the plants and animals would never die of thirst. She had heard whispers about the star's strange talents, but all anyone would tell her was that as long as the fairies kept their promise, they could keep the star.

She could see the star now, gleaming in the snow beside Melvina's gown. Cantala shivered. The chief dancer, Tekana, said the queen wasn't supposed to take the star off. Ever. But there it lay on the snow, strung on a silver chain.

Without warning, a huge black shadow swooped low over the spring, landed beside the Crystal Star, and scooped it up.

Queen Melvina screamed.

A cruel, mocking laugh bruised Cantala's ears. The black shadow spread its wings and soared upward. Cantala rushed out of her grass bower, hands covering her mouth to keep her scream inside.

Beldo, the Black Witch!

Cantala trembled as Beldo disappeared over the top of the hill. The horrible Black Witch was even bigger and uglier than the storytellers said.

Queen Melvina struggled into her gown of woven ice grass and hurried to Cantala's side. "Without the Crystal Star we are doomed," she said, her face filled with grief.

Cantala was terrified. "What will the Black Witch do?"

"Child, no one knows. She is like the wind; she blows this way and that. She is subject to no rules but her own whims."

Cantala followed Queen Melvina into the grotto where the Ice Fairies sang as they wove snowflakes for the North Wind, each in a different and wonderful design.

"Cantala, you are a very naughty fairy. Where have you been?" Oriana, the head weaver, bore down on her. "Duty comes before play."

The others turned their faces away. All except Finn, who was the same age as Cantala. He smiled and winked at her from behind the tip of one wing.

"Never mind that," cried the queen. "Beldo, the Black Witch, has stolen the Crystal Star."

The fairies crowded around the queen. "Oh, what shall we do?" they wailed, voices

trembling. "What will happen to us?"

Gabriel, the queen's consort, pushed through the crowd to Melvina's side and put his arm around her. "We lack the strength to do much," he said, "but I know what will happen if we don't get the Crystal Star back."

"Please tell us," Cantala said. She had often asked the older fairies about the star, and they always told her she was too young to know the secret lore. It wasn't fair. If she was old enough to weave snowflakes, she was old enough to learn the lore.

Gabriel covered his silver eyes with his hands, tears slipping through his fingers and, as they froze, tinkling to the polished ice beneath his feet. "Life on earth will be destroyed." He wiped away his tears. "You see, the star is very powerful. On December twenty-first, when the winter solstice is supposed to occur, the queen holds the star up to the sun and chants a magic verse. The light within the Crystal Star turns green and the days begin to lengthen. Our hair and wings become the color of new leaves. By the time spring comes, we are Water Fairies, making morning dew for the plants."

Gabriel went on. "It is the same, only in reverse, at the summer solstice. Our queen holds the star to the moonlight and recites another verse. The light within the Crystal turns gold, like autumn leaves, and the days become shorter. We slowly change back to Ice Fairies."

"But what will happen now?" Oriana asked. "If we don't have the Crystal Star, how can we change the seasons, how can we make sure spring will come?"

"We can't." Gabriel wiped away another tear. "Unless we get the Crystal Star back before December twenty-first, the world will stay frozen forever. All the animals and plants will die."

The fairies gasped in horror.

Queen Melvina said, "Think hard, everyone. We must decide what to do."

Rowena, the head cook, brought leaf cups of refreshing spring water and the fairies sipped rainbow beads of water while they thought.

Finn darted to the center of the floor. "Why don't we fly to Beldo's mountain ledge and demand she give us the star back? She has no right to it."

"What makes you think she'd listen to us?" said Coran, who often competed with Finn to see who could fly the fastest. "She could kill half a dozen of us with one swipe of her hand."

Cantala said, "She's huge, Finn. It would be like a chickadee telling an eagle what to do."

The queen sniffled into her handkerchief. "You're very brave, Finn, but Beldo is evil. And with the Crystal Star, her evil genius will be multiplied a hundredfold. That's why she stole it. Now she has the power of fire and ice as well as her own black gifts. We wouldn't have a chance against her."

"Perhaps," said Gabriel, "she will let us use the star at the summer and winter solstices if we give her something in exchange."

But Beldo doesn't want dew or snowflakes or spring water, Cantala thought. The tales say she eats mice and rats and drinks their blood. She probably eats fairies, too, when she can catch them. It's not right that we should have to bargain with her. The Crystal Star belongs to us. She rose. "I will go to Emrys, the wise old wizard, and ask him for help."

Oriana looked indignant. "You can't even weave proper snowflakes."

"She can weave spells," shouted Finn.

The fairies stared at her. "Is that right, my dear?" asked Melvina. "Do you have the gift?"

"A little bit," Cantala said, gazing at her silver shoe buckles and wishing Finn had kept quiet. "Birds and bees will come when I call. I don't know how to do anything else."

Melvina looked at her for a long time. "It may be enough. Yes, you shall go and see the

wizard. He may teach you other things that will be useful."

Finn tossed his head in glee, silver curls bouncing. "Can I go with her?"

"No," said Melvina. "If Cantala has the gift, this is something she must do alone." She touched Cantala's cheek. "Go quickly. There are not many days until the solstice."

Cantala flew west into the rising hills, not stopping to rest until she entered the enchanted forest. The trees grew close together, their branches embracing as though dancing. She sat and leaned against the trunk of an aspen.

A Whiskey Jack landed on a snowy branch above her head. He smoothed his gray feathers before bowing his white crowned head to her. "Whee-ah," he wheezed. "You're looking for Emrys, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Whee-ah." The notes now sounded like a chuckle. "I know everything. I am King of the Birds.

"I didn't know birds could talk."

"Whee-ah, whee-ah, whee-ah." Clearly, he was laughing. "Don't know much, do you, little ice fairy? Every bird and animal in the enchanted forest can talk. The wizard likes our company."

He wiped his mighty beak on the branch, showing the black patch on the back of his head.

"Will you take me to the wizard?"

"What do you want with him? He doesn't like being bothered."

"We need help to defeat Beldo, the Black Witch."

"Wharrrrk," the Whiskey Jack exclaimed. He cocked his head on one side. "I will take you, but don't expect anything."

Miles later, the Whiskey Jack landed on the roof of a small hut. "You're on your own now. Good luck." He flew off as the door opened and a tall old man with a long beard stepped out.

"What do you want, fairy?" He scowled, as though he couldn't wait for her to leave.

Cantala's teeth chattered with fright. "We've lost the Crystal Star."

He scowled harder. "You'd better come in."

Inside the hut, the wizard sat at his table, fingers laced together, and listened while Cantala told him the story.

"Humph. What do you expect me to do about it? You got yourselves into this fix, you can get yourselves out."

"But how? Beldo has all the power."

Emrys's gray eyes gleamed beneath his bushy brows. "Does she? If you believe that, you're doomed indeed. You must believe in your own gifts."

Cantala felt like crying. Emrys was mean. What power did she have? She couldn't even get the edges straight on a six-sided snowflake. As for being able to call birds, what good was that?

"Won't you at least teach me some spells?"

"No. You must make your own."

Cantala looked at the rows and rows of books on the wizard's shelf and flew over to hover in front of them. "Can I look up the spells myself?"

A blast of thunder knocked her across the room.

"No. Those are not for you." Emrys glowered, his words crackling like lightening. "You must figure things out for yourself."

Two silver tears slid down her cheeks as she fled the hut.

The wizard shouted from the doorway, "You will learn what you need to know."

The further Cantala flew, the madder she got. If the horrible old wizard wouldn't help, she'd

fly to Beldo's ledge and snatch the star right out of her hand.

The thought of facing Beldo made her wings tremble so much she fell headfirst into a snowdrift. Shaken, she struggled out, shook the snow off her wings and flew toward home. She couldn't face Beldo by herself, but Finn would help and perhaps some of the others. They must get the Crystal Star back to save the animals and plants.

It was almost dark when Cantala returned to the grotto, a big orange moon rising over the hill. The fairies gathered around her. "What did Emrys say?"

"He won't help."

The fairies groaned.

Queen Melvina asked, "Why not?"

"He says we lost the star because we were careless, so we have to get it back ourselves."

Queen Melvina bowed her head. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't taken off the star to bathe in the pool, this wouldn't have happened. I will go to Beldo and ask her to give me the Crystal Star."

"No," shouted the fairies. "You cannot go. You are the queen."

"No," said Gabriel, putting his arm around Melvina, "you would face certain death. With the star, Beldo can wield ice and fire. She could melt you in a second."

Cantala saw in her mind's eye Beldo pointing a finger at her, flames shooting from the tip. She felt the heat, felt her body melting away. She shuddered, then stood. "We can't talk to Beldo or attack her, or she will destroy us. The only chance we have is to get the star by trickery."

"But," said Melvina, "we are not practiced in stealth."

"I think we must learn," Cantala said. "I will go up the mountain to Beldo's ledge and try to discover where she keeps the Crystal Star. Perhaps I can take it when she's not looking."

Finn said, "I am going with you. Coran, are you coming?"

Coran flipped his silver braid over one shoulder and came to stand with Cantala and Finn. "Anybody else?"

Oriana, the head weaver, said, "This is foolish. If you go, you'll just get yourselves killed."

"If we don't go," Cantala said, "spring will never come."

"And if you don't go soon," Gabriel said, "it will be too late. The solstice is only four days away."

"Are you sure the only way to get the Crystal Star back from the witch is to trick her?" Finn brushed his silver curls out of his eyes.

Cantala shook her wings and folded them neatly. "Can you think of any other way?"

"No."

"Neither can I," said Coran.

"Then that's what we have to do," Cantala said. "I don't like it either, but we must get the star back or the whole world will die."

Finn smiled. "I'll do whatever you say, Cantala, and go wherever you go. I love you."

"Oh, Finn." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "I love you, too."

Coran said, "We don't have much time." He stepped outside the grotto. "Let's go. It's after midnight and the moon is bright."

It took a long time to reach the mountain where the Black Witch, lived, but it was easy to find her ledge. Ashes and a mess of small bones littered the snow. As the fairies flew closer, Cantala realized the big black lump curled up in a corner between two rocks was Beldo, snoring.

"Oh, the place stinks," Coran said.

"Shhh." Cantala put a finger against her lips. "See the opening in the rocks? There must be a cave behind the ledge. Let's see if she's hidden the Crystal Star in there."

"What if we get trapped inside?" Coran asked.

"Then we'll find some way of getting out," Cantala said, wishing she believed it. "Come on. And be quiet."

The cave was small and even smellier than the ledge outside. Two dead mice lay inside the opening. She set Finn and Coran to searching the floor of the cave while she delved into every crack and cranny among the rocks.

"There's nothing down here," Finn whispered.

"I can't find anything either," Cantala whispered back. "Wait. Here's an opening I didn't see before." The crack in the rock was tiny, and it smelled awful, like rotting meat. She felt she'd rather die than put her hand in there.

But she couldn't give up now. Her fingers closed around a small package. She pulled it out and choked as she saw that it was the fresh hide of a rat, folded into a square. She flew to the floor of the cave and spread the skin.

There was the Crystal Star, filthy with blood, but gleaming in the faint glow of moonlight. Finn quickly fastened the chain around her neck.

"Come on, let's go," Coran whispered. "We've done it."

The moonlight dimmed. A huge black shape filled the doorway.

Beldo laughed, the harsh sound echoing around the cave. "You're not going anywhere, sneaky little thieves. I've got you right where I want you."

Cantala slipped the Crystal Star under her tunic where the Black Witch couldn't see it, then darted toward the roof of the cave, hoping Beldo wouldn't see her either.

A hand grabbed her out of the air, knocking the wind out of her and crushing her wings against her body.

"Aha, now I've got you." Beldo gave a nasty laugh. "You tell your two friends to stand still, or I'll eat you right here and now."

All Cantala could do was squeak. Her eyes filled with tears as Beldo grabbed Finn and Coran with her other hand. Now Beldo would eat them all and keep the Crystal Star. The Ice Fairies were doomed. She had failed.

Beldo stomped around the cave, kicking things. "Now where did I put that little box? Ah, there it is." She shoved Cantala, Finn and Coran into the box and slammed the lid. "You can stay there until morning, little thieves. You'll be delicious for breakfast. I'll save the mice for lunch."

There was a bump as Beldo put the box down, then a thump. It was pitch black inside the box, but Cantala soon found Finn's hand, then Coran's.

"Do something, Cantala," Finn said.

"Let's push against the lid," she said. The lid would not budge. "Beldo must have put a rock on top."

"I will try and do something with the Crystal Star," she said.

Cantala rubbed the star. She pointed it at the other side of the box and murmured, "Burn, star, burn."

Nothing happened. She turned the Star over and over in her hands, but no silver light shone from within. "I don't know what to do; I don't know the Lore of Magic," she wailed. "Maybe the witch put a hex on it."

They sat still, huddled together against one wall of the box. It seemed like forever, yet only a few precious seconds, before they heard Beldo take the stone from the top of the box. When the lid came off, Cantala blinked in the dawn light.

"You first," Beldo said, and snatched Finn out of the box.

"Oh, no," cried Cantala. "I'll go first."

"Be quiet," Beldo said. "Your turn will come soon enough. Now where did I put the salt and pepper?"

At that moment Cantala saw an eagle perched on a fir tree. "Eagle, come," she called.

The eagle spread his wings and soared down toward her.

"Attack the witch," she screamed.

While Beldo roared with anger, the eagle tore at her with his beak and claws.

"Fly, Cantala, fly home." Finn's voice was urgent. He struggled in the witch's hand as she fought the eagle with the other.

"I can't leave you, Finn."

"You must," he urged her. "You must take the Crystal Star home and save the rest of the tribe."

"He's right," Coran said. "Come on."

As Cantala and Coran flew into the bright morning sky, the witch cursed and screamed.

When Cantala glanced back, she saw Finn still clutched in the witch's hand. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She might never see him again.

When Cantala and Coran arrived in the grotto and Cantala held up the Crystal Star, the fairies cheered and crowded around her. They hugged and patted her, laughing with delight.

Queen Melvina took the Crystal Star from her and said, "You saved the world from endless winter. Now we can keep our promise to Emrys, the wise old wizard. What would you like in return?"

More tears rolled down Cantala's face. "I want you to save Finn. He couldn't get away from the witch."

The queen looked as if she might cry, too. "Oh, my dear, it may be too late, but we'll try. We must wait until tonight when the moon is out so that you can use the star, otherwise we will have no power against the witch. Go bathe and get some rest. I will call you when the time is right."

Try as she might, Cantala couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Finn, helpless in the witch's grasp. She couldn't bear to think of Beldo eating him. And what if the witch decided she liked fairies better than mice and rats? She might swoop down and catch more of the tribe.

At midnight, Queen Melvina called her. "Come, Cantala. I'll tell you what I know about the Crystal Star. You were born with the gift of magic, which I was not, and you may be able to use the star to free Finn."

Queen Melvina spoke for several minutes. "Now you know the lore of the star. Go, and good luck."

Cantala flew toward the witch's mountain, alone this time, the Crystal Star on its silver chain fastened around her neck. It might be too late to save Finn, but if she could stop the witch from flying into the valley again, the rest of the tribe would be safe.

She hovered over the witch's ledge, the moon bright and full above the mountain peak.

"Beldo, come out," she called in a shaky voice.

A black shape uncurled itself from between the rocks, and Beldo shook her fist at Cantala. "I'll get you this time, you impudent pest." She threw off her black cape and unfolded her wings.

Cantala held the star up to the moon, beamed the silver light on Beldo and chanted:

"By the magic of the Crystal Star

All your powers have flown.

Now, just like your wicked heart,
Your body will turn to stone."

Beldo stood on the ledge, her wings outspread, her arms raised high. She was absolutely still. Not a sound, not a breath came from her. The curse had worked.

A hoarse cry came from the box at Beldo's feet. Cantala flew closer, afraid the witch might come to life again. But as she came level with the witch's face, she saw that indeed Beldo had turned to stone.

"Help!"

It was Finn's voice. He was alive! Cantala tugged the stone off the top of the box and knocked the lid off with her shoulder.

He lay in the bottom of the box, one wing broken. Cantala held both his hands. "I'm so glad you're safe. Why didn't she eat you?"

"She thought the tribe might come to rescue me and get close enough for her to catch all of you."

"She's not going to catch anyone, ever again," Cantala said. She helped Finn out of the box. Using his unbroken wing, and clinging to her hand, they flew back to the grotto.

"After these last few days," Cantala said, as they walked into the central hall, "I'll be content to weave snowflakes, even though I don't do it well."

The fairies gathered around. Coran took Finn away, saying, "We'll get your wing mended. You'll be as good as new in a week."

Queen Melvina smiled at Cantala. "You won't have to weave snowflakes anymore."

Cantala didn't understand. "But everyone has to weave snowflakes."

"The queen doesn't," Melvina said.

Cantala could barely believe what she'd heard. "You mean I'm to be queen?"

Melvina nodded. "Yes, you are, for you have rescued the star and saved the plants and animals of this world from death. For the next year, we will teach you everything we know of the lore. Then we will have a dance and a feast, and the Crystal Star will hang around your neck forever." She smiled again. "And if you wish to have Finn as your consort, I'm sure everyone will be delighted."

"But what will happen to you?" Cantala asked. "Will you have to weave snowflakes?"

Melvina shook her head. "No, my dear. When a queen retires, she becomes first advisor to the new queen. I'll always be here to help you."

Cantala smiled, remembering what Emrys had said about believing in her own power. Soon she would have Finn as consort and never, ever have to weave another snowflake. And once the Crystal Star hung around her neck, she would never take it off.

She went to the mouth of the grotto and gazed at the waning moon. Tomorrow was December twenty-first. Melvina would call the turn of the season with the Star and the winter solstice would come true.

Laughing with joy, Cantala danced into the grotto. "Spring is coming, spring is coming!"



OLD WOMAN

She clings to my back,
her talons buried in my skull.
I plead for mercy,
struggle,
scream defiance,
throw logic at her,
sarcasm.

Her coarse grey hair
slashes across my face,
stings my lips,
obscures my vision.

When I stumble, she cackles,
kicks me in the ribs with
her sensible black oxfords,
and says, "I told you so!"

SNOW WOMAN

She wakened with an uneasy feeling, before the alarm went off, and lay blinking in the half-light, listening. Her husband lay beside her, the intake of his breath verging on a gentle snore. Except for the hum of the furnace, the rest of the house was quiet.

Too quiet, she realized. Where were all the traffic noises, the roar of the bus that lumbered by at this time of the morning?

She slid out of bed and went to the window, her uneasiness diminishing as she thought of all the possible reasons for a traffic tie-up. It could be another accident at the foot of the hill. She hoped it would be cleared up before her husband had to leave; he had an important meeting this morning. But it was early still.

Parting the drapes, she caught her breath in surprise. Surprise changed to delight as she looked at the gift she'd never thought this rain-washed country would bring her. A mist of dry snowflakes sifted out of the grey dawn and already the winter-yellowed grass and the pavement had disappeared under it. Memories of her snow-bound childhood flooded into her mind, and she nearly laughed aloud in anticipation. The children would be ecstatic; they'd never seen snow.

As she watched the bus turn the corner and make its slow cautious way up the hill, skidding slightly on the curve, she remembered, with a twinge of self-reproach, her husband's meeting. He hated snow; for him this storm would be nothing but a nuisance. She moved to wake him. Taxis would be scarce in this weather and if he wanted one, he'd have to call early.

The snow continued to fall, thickening to large, heavy, wet flakes. The blank grey stucco wall of the house next door faded to an insubstantial blur behind the swirling mass. Her husband hugged her at the door, and though she hadn't voiced her pleasure in the snow, said, "Enjoy yourself; it won't last, you know." She watched him get into the taxi, which slithered away from the curb and vanished down the hill.

All through breakfast the children chattered about the snow, their voices muted as if the silencing effect of the thick flakes had reached indoors. She told them about sleigh-rides, and snow men, and snowball fights, and they sat wide-eyed, marveling at this strange world their mother had known.

She would not let them outside during the morning. There was not yet enough snow to make a snow man, and she had to find something suitable for them to wear. They watched television in the living room, murmuring to each other during the commercials, and she sat for a while at the kitchen window, the small jade plant on the windowsill glowing green in the pale light. Ancient snowflakes drifted around her and melted away like gentle dreams.

In the attic she found her old parka, smelling of camphor but intact. She pulled it on and the familiar fur caressing her cheeks brought a new thrill of excitement. Her old boots were there, high and lined with fur. I'll make them wear two pairs of mitts, she thought, remembering that fingers freeze the fastest. And then reminded herself that here in the south the temperature would be mild no matter how deep the snow. But they must wear scarves, too, and so would she.

At noon she gave them cream of tomato soup and saltines at the kitchen table in front of the window, and still the snow fell thick and heavy. The feeling of being totally isolated in a silent, white world gave her an odd sense of security.

After lunch she dressed the children while they wriggled and chattered and opened the back door for them. They ran out, voices shrill with excitement. Smiling, she watched them tumbling in the unfamiliar softness of the snow like brightly colored puppies. Then she turned to put on

her parka and boots, eager to follow them.

Out in the whirling flakes, the snow packed and slid under her feet. The wind was sharp, and she stood, eyes closed, and face raised to cold kisses from the sky, letting the wind sweep through her. She began to walk, putting each foot down gently, aware of how the snow felt underfoot, the way it sounded, remembering other snows and other sounds. This soft heavy snow packed down under her weight into firm fragments, mirroring the ridges on the soles of her boots. There was a great deal of it now; enough to make a snow man.

The winters she'd known as a child had been much colder, the snow dry and granular and blowing in the wind with stinging impact, piling up in drifts along the fence lines. She remembered the open country under lowering grey skies, nothing but waves of drifted, wind-ridged snow punctuated here and there by clumps of willow. She remembered herself, sturdy and muffled to the eyes in fur and wool, trotting through the empty landscape intent on games of make-believe.

She held her face up again and the large flakes brushed her skin with an instant of coolness before melting away. They tickled her eyelids, stuck in her lashes. She put out her tongue and the flakes feathered against it. Feeling the urge to tumble in the snow like the children, she began to run, her exhilaration mounting, only to be halted by the weathered picket fence with its absurd caps of snow. Longingly, she thought of the open prairie where she had run through miles of waving grass and skimmed over the first bleak snows of October. I wish they could do those things, too, she thought. They'd have so much fun.

"Come on," she called to the children, "I'll show you how to make an angel." She led them through the side gate to the front yard, where the snow was pure, unmarked.

She flopped backwards, full length, the familiar yielding of the snow under her body bringing a grin of pleasure to her face. Slowly she moved her arms up from her sides to nearly over her head and back again, pushing the snow away. Jumping up, she said, "There! An angel with big wings, see?"

Giggling, they copied her actions, then scrambled up.

"Looks like a bat, Mommy," said the younger of the two.

"No, it's Superman!" shrilled the elder. "Let's make more Supermen!"

Down they flopped again, flailing their arms, while she watched, vaguely disappointed. Bats? Superman? What had happened to angels?

"All right, come along," she said firmly. "You've made enough angels. I'll show you how the Indians used to walk in single file." On the unscarred strip of snow by the driveway she concentrated on putting one foot directly in front of the other, keeping them pointed straight ahead. "Now you follow," she said, "and put your feet exactly where I've put mine. Then anyone seeing the prints would think only one person had made them."

They began copying her again, until the younger fell against the elder, and he pushed her, and they ended wrestling in the snow. But their heavily-mitten fists fell impotently against each other and they picked themselves up when she demanded it.

"There's no Indians around here anyway, Mom," said the elder. "You could show us how to make a snow man."

Yes, she could do that. She'd made enough of them when she was a child. She led them into the back yard and closed the gate behind her.

She showed them how to roll the snow into a ball which grew bigger and bigger as it picked up more damp clinging snow. Then she explained that the biggest ball was for the bottom half of the snow man, a medium sized one for his top half, and a tiny one for his head. She was

suggesting things they could use for the eyes and mouth when the elder interrupted her.

"Mom, I've got a better idea. I want to make a snow woman, a real one."

"Me too, me too," chimed in his sister, never wanting to be left out even when she didn't know what was going on.

She looked down at their flushed, sparkling faces. They seemed so ready to ignore the traditions she had grown up with. But, of course, the traditions were hers, not theirs. She wished they could have grown up in the north, enjoyed all the things she had enjoyed. They would never have that chance here.

"You're very inventive," she said, "But just how do you think you're going to make a real snow woman?"

"Easy, Mom. You'll be the snow woman. You can sit cross-legged on the ground like that lady who does yoga on TV, and we'll just cover you up."

The younger, let in on the secret, squealed in delight.

Why not? It wasn't too cold, and she ought to encourage their creativity. Besides, she admitted to herself, she would enjoy sitting there with the snow swirling around her and letting her mind wander through past snowfalls.

"All right," she said, "but remember, I'm not going to stay here all night so you can rush out in the morning to see if I've melted."

"Heck, no," said the elder. "Who'd make our supper?"

She obligingly sat down on the piece of foam rubber they found for a cushion and crossed her legs. They settled to work with a seriousness that was almost solemn. Once they'd used the balls of snow they'd already made, and what they could scoop up with their hands close by, they foraged farther afield. Soon they'd covered her legs and her lap, and behind her the snow wall was up to her shoulder blades. She let her arms lie loosely in her lap. Then these were covered, and the snow wall was up to her neck.

She was entranced, watching them. The snow felt comforting and solid, and the flakes still fell thickly all around, mesmerizing in their kaleidoscopic dance. She bent her head back, squinting her eyes to watch them shooting down out of the seething grey-white turbulence above. They all seemed to be aiming at her, thousands of dazzling white streaks diving toward her face. She blinked as they caught in her eyelashes and slid down her cheeks.

She started out of her reverie when she discovered the children were plotting to cover her completely. She wondered if they realized she would need to breathe. But they did; they meant to enlarge the snow wall around her and build a tiny igloo on top. She would not be able to move her head because the roof of the igloo would rest on her parka hood, but there would be space enough for her to breathe.

They worked carefully, but in no time the snow wall was level with her nose, then her eyes, then she was closed in entirely. The snow was too thick to be translucent, yet the enclosure was not dark. The solid whitish wall before her, she thought, was like the reflection that glows from a white-washed wall in the moonlight. Outside, the children giggled with delight as they inspected their handiwork.

Inside her fragile cocoon the snow woman smiled. She listened to them planning to build a snow fence around her, and then their voices faded from her mind, and she sat immobile, dreaming her snowbound dreams.

She did not know how long she'd been oblivious, but suddenly it seemed as if she'd just wakened, and the children's voices were right behind her.

"I wish this dumb old snow would go away," said the younger.

"Me, too. It's boring."

"Are we gonna finish this dumb old fence?"

"Yeah, I guess. So we can show Dad. But we gotta hurry, 'cause I want to watch Star Trek."

Her disappointment cut more bitterly than she'd thought possible. Star Trek! How could they think about television when they had all this? How had she failed to communicate the precious quality of this day?

The voices began again.

The elder said, "Remember last summer when we were at the beach every day and I used to cover you up with sand?"

"I remember," said the younger. "And then I'd go in the water and wash it all off. That was fun."

"Yeah. I can't wait for summer so we can do that again."

Their wistful tones were so like her own when she was talking about her childhood winters that she burst out laughing, the bitterness dissipating into a wry recognition. It had never occurred to her that they would create their own nostalgia, that it would be as precious to them as her memories were to her.

Then another voice mingled with those of the children, who were now shrieking with pride.

"This is our snow woman!" they cried.

"Very nice," said her husband, "and clever of you to think of making a snow woman instead of a snow man. But where is your mother? She doesn't seem to be in the house."

"In there." They must be pointing at her. "This is a real snow woman, Daddy, not a pretend one."

"Under all that snow?" His tone was indulgent. "That sounds like your mother, all right. Let's get her out."

They brushed the snow away from her face and arms, and her husband helped her up. She realized belatedly that she was chilled and stiff, that the snow had melted around her legs and her slacks were soaking wet.

"Well," he said, "you got right into it, didn't you?"

"You said it wouldn't last," she reminded him.

"No, it won't. There's rain forecast for tonight."

"I'm glad," she said. "The children were getting bored."

"And you?"

"Of course not, but the rain won't wash away my memory of the day." She brushed off the last of the snow. "We'd better go in."

"Yes, it's nearly time for dinner."

"And Star Trek. Don't forget Star Trek," she said, smiling.

JANUARY

Rain, unceasing, sibilant,
slanting against the windowpanes,
sluicing brittle branches,
scouring gravel,
steeping the boggy grass.

In shades of gray
and starless black
the sky
revolves, revolves, revolves.

Under a sodden leaf,
waiting patiently,
the first snowdrop.

CHARLIE

Hey, buddy, good to see you! No, put your money away; it's my turn to buy. You bought coffee last time, remember, before your grandkids came to visit. Must be kind of fun to have six; I've only got the one.

You've never met Grady, have you? My grandson. I ran into him yesterday when I was taking a stroll along Hastings, having a look at the old stamping grounds. You should have seen him! He looked like he belonged down there on skid row. Long, stringy hair and a Fu Manchu mustache, filthy baseball cap, dirt under his fingernails. He walked right by me, and I bet I won't see him for months.

Ashamed? Hell, no, I'm proud of him.

Because he's a chip off the old block, that's why. He joined the RCMP the same age I did, and I know from how he looked yesterday that he's doing the same job I did for a while — undercover for the Drug Squad. What used to be called a horseman. Maybe still is. I'll have to ask Grady.

I never told you I was undercover? Well, I don't talk much about it except to guys I used to work with. Or Grady, when he asks how we did things in the dark ages.

The scene has changed a lot since I joined up. Back then the core of the drug culture in Vancouver was maybe two hundred people and they lived for one thing. Heroin. Now it's thousands, Grady says, and what with coke and hash and ecstasy and crap like that around, I guess users can pick and choose, like in a supermarket.

We went after dealers the hardest because they were supplying the drugs. There was often a camaraderie between us and the users. Hell, you might say we were in the same business. The same game, anyway. They tried to buy heroin and we tried to stop them, and it's not like we were shooting at each other.

Grady says that's still pretty much the same except he figures we had it easier then, not having to worry so much about this political correctness junk. He's a great kid, he likes listening to my stories.

But there's one I've never told anybody and I'll sure as hell never tell him.

You want to hear it? Well, okay. I've been thinking about it ever since I walked around Main and Hastings yesterday and I'm kind of in the mood to get it off my chest. We better get a refill on the coffee, though.

It's fifty years since I met Charlie Sullivan, but I'll never forget him. Charlie was a nickname; nobody knew his real first name. He was a heroin addict and a hustler, the best I ever played against. Grady says 'hustler' means a male prostitute now, but back then it meant someone who was respected as a hot snooker player.

How I came to know Charlie was the RCMP sending me here to the west coast to work undercover. They had a 'duke-in' — that's a man willing to introduce an undercover cop to the drug people, vouch for him as a good guy and steer him. Renzo was the name of the duke-in and he agreed to steer me for a month.

Why? Because he'd have spent five years in the can if he hadn't. Renzo had run a bordello and been caught supplying heroin to his girls. In return for his freedom, the RCMP asked him to introduce me into the drug racket in Vancouver. He agreed to do it for a month, providing he got a plane ticket to Winnipeg and five hundred bucks for his services. So, I arrived and spent the next month being duked-in by him. He told the crowd he'd known me in Sudbury where I was a

pimp and also that I'd done time for theft.

Renzo was well known in the right places, so I had no trouble getting in with the people on the 'corner.' That's a slang term for the area where addicts and peddlers hang out. Main and Hastings was the center of it, plus maybe six square blocks around that.

No, we never use our own names when we go undercover, except it's a good idea to use your real first name because you're used to answering to it. So I was Dave, but for a last name I called myself Bellamy, after my favorite uncle. Dave Bellamy. Has kind of a nice ring to it, doesn't it?

Well, like they say, time flies when you're having fun and pretty soon it was time for Renzo to leave. I went to see him off. He liked the wristwatch I wore and, on a whim, I took it off at the airport and gave it to him as a parting gift. It was still on his wrist when his body was found in the Red River about a year later. But hey, that's another story.

So now I was on my own at the corner. I'd already bought heroin from some small-time dealers and was just hanging around, waiting to score from other dealers. I spent a lot of time at Dutch's pool room and shot snooker with the local hypes. Actually, I was a pretty good snooker player myself, though I could never be called a hustler.

Charlie was at the pool room almost every day; he made a living shooting snooker and betting on his games. I never played against him because I knew I couldn't beat him. I soon learned to play snooker with hypes that were on the nod — high on heroin — because they were easy to beat. But even though Charlie was wired he was still the best hustler I ever saw, the uncrowned king of pool hustlers at the corner, a local legend. No one ever beat him.

Two months went by, and I was still nowhere in scoring from different dealers. I had to keep buying off the same ones I already had evidence against, so I'd look like a regular user. I was at Dutch's pool room every day and often watched Charlie 'clean a table' for ten bucks against a mark. He was the most amazing snooker player I'd ever seen. Sure, he'd miss the odd shot, but not when it mattered. Or maybe he just liked to suck the mark into thinking he had a chance.

Not far from the pool room was Louie's Café. It was a cheap, dirty restaurant where the people from the corner used to go. I ate there regularly, and Charlie would often come and talk to me. He told me he'd joined the army as a teenager during the first world war and was wounded at Ypres. His job was to lead pack trains of mules and horses to deliver ammunition to the soldiers in the trenches. To keep the animals calm under fire, he was trained to give them injections of heroin. Then he started giving himself shots. That's how he became addicted. He was only seventeen when he was shipped home at the end of the war.

Yeah, kind of shakes you, doesn't it? He couldn't have been more than thirteen, fourteen, when he joined up.

Charlie was always friendly and often talked quite openly to me about the local drug racket. I learned things from him that were of value to me in my work. And I was a young, keen cop in those days, the same as Grady is now. I guess I figured I was going to wipe heroin right out of Vancouver. Didn't take me long to understand that would never happen. As long as there are addicts looking for drugs, there'll be somebody around to supply them.

Anyway, one day Charlie told me to meet him later at Dutch's pool room and he'd give me a lesson in snooker. When I got there, several guys from the corner were watching.

It wasn't long before I began to wonder what was going on. Charlie made some damn nice shots, but not as many as usual. He often left me in a good position to make points and I wasn't one to turn down any opportunity to win. I finally decided he'd taken a fix not long before and was too smacked out to play properly. He sure looked like he was trying, though. That was fine with me; I liked the idea of beating the corner legend.

A snooker game takes only about twenty minutes to play but before it was over, we had a gallery watching. Guys were making side bets and the area around our table was quiet as the crowd watched. I beat Charlie by just a few points.

No, I don't remember the score or the fine details of the games, but I took him two games out of three. Later we went to Louie's for coffee. He never said a word about the games and neither did I. I'd enjoyed beating him, but I didn't want to rub it in. Anyway, for all I knew, he'd had some kind of betting scam going on.

From that time on I was a mini celebrity at the corner. I had beaten the legendary Charlie at snooker. I kept on shooting snooker and rarely lost, but I was damn careful to play nobody but guys on the nod or marks off the street. I was pretty sure my fantastic luck in winning off Charlie wouldn't hold.

Yeah, I did play Charlie one other time, but that came later.

Charlie sometimes used to go to a restaurant away from the corner and invite me to go with him. It was about a ten-block walk from the corner, but worth it because the food was good. I learned that he lived upstairs and had an arrangement where he washed dishes in the kitchen certain days of the week and got meals instead of pay. I'd go there maybe once a week for the food and because I liked talking to Charlie. He told me he was born in 1901, which made him the same age as my father.

Charlie never suggested another game between us, but I kept my reputation as a snooker expert. Now that I'd become the legend who beat Charlie, the big dealers were less suspicious, and I had a good run of scoring junk. The time finally came when the brass told me to pull out as I had done all I could about catching the local dealers.

So, I went back to routine drug policing, trying to arrest dealers and users as an openly recognized horseman. Whenever I saw Charlie around the corner a friendly smile passed between us. It was strange but none of us ever tried to catch Charlie with drugs. I knew he'd never been arrested.

Some months after I was pulled out, I went to the restaurant where I had eaten with Charlie and saw him at his usual table. I walked over and sat with him. We ate together, not saying much. Afterward I said, "Charlie, you threw those games, didn't you?"

He smiled at me and said, "You needed help."

That's when I realized he'd known all along I was an undercover horseman and had deliberately lost the games to give me a reputation. Also, the information he'd given me from time to time had steered me in the right direction to get evidence against the dealers.

"Why did you help me, Charlie?"

"Because selling drugs is bad."

You thought Charlie would be loyal to the guys who supplied him? So did I. I said to him, "But you've been a heroin addict for more than thirty years!"

"I got myself into that," Charlie said. "Pushing drugs on kids who've never used is bad."

The other thing I realized was that he could have burned me — told the local dealers I was a horseman. I might have ended up at the bottom of the Fraser River. Instead, he chose to steer me. I asked how he had found out I was a horseman. He said Renzo asked him to take care of me.

That conversation gave me a lot to think about. Charlie was a hype, yet he was a man of integrity, one of the finest men I'd ever met. Being on the other side of the fence, the dealers sure as hell wouldn't have thought so. Charlie was running some risks, too.

I didn't see Charlie for a while after that. But a few months later I was with a bunch of horsemen, raiding an old run-down apartment where hypes hung out. I went to one of the rooms

and was surprised to find Charlie there, sitting in a chair. I didn't know he'd moved from his room above the restaurant.

Charlie knew it was a raid but said nothing while I searched the room. He simply watched me. I opened a drawer and found a cigarette pack that contained enough heroin caps to keep Charlie for about a week.

My back was to him when I found them, and I said nothing. Neither did he. I simply closed the drawer and turned around. Charlie knew it was routine for us to frisk anybody we found in a raid. He stood up and lifted his arms. I took a step toward him, but I couldn't bring myself to frisk this man who had helped me. I merely patted him on the shoulder and left. The Sergeant in charge asked me what I'd found.

I was sweating; I'd broken the law myself by not taking possession of those heroin caps and I'd be in deep trouble if my superiors found out. Plus, there was always a chance one of the other horsemen would go in Charlie's room and search it again.

"He's clean," I said.

I lost some sleep over that one. It was my duty to enforce the law and I hadn't done it.

One good turn deserves another? I guess you could put it that way.

No, that's not the end of the story. Like I said, there was a camaraderie between the hypes and the horsemen. We could wander into any place and have casual talk with anyone, even though they knew who we were. It was common to see two horsemen—we always worked in pairs—sitting in Louie's Café drinking coffee and chatting with addicts. It wasn't too long after I learned Charlie had let me win at snooker that my partner, Gordon, and I went into Dutch's pool room.

Charlie was there and gave me the usual friendly knowing smile. On an impulse I went to a snooker table, racked the balls, and chose a cue. Giving Charlie an expectant smile, I placed a ten-dollar bill on the rail of the table. He silently accepted my challenge.

The game wasn't half over before we had a gallery watching us. My partner even placed a bet against me, loud enough for me to hear him do it. We played three games for best two out of three, and I used every bit of skill I had. Charlie beat me three straight.

I left three tens on the rail, enough to buy him heroin for a week. But more important, I had given him back his title as the unbeatable legend. I knew I was going to be transferred and it was the last thing I could do for him before I left.

I was sent back to Montreal soon after. In 1963 Gordon and I were both promoted, and we talked on the phone to congratulate each other. He told me Charlie had been found dead of an overdose. Charlie was too experienced with heroin to accidentally OD. It had to be suicide.

What happens to people like that? He was likely buried in an unmarked grave. He'd never asked the world for anything, but I think it owed him at least a headstone. I would have put on it, "This is the final resting place of a man of integrity, Charlie Sullivan, 1901-1963."

You think Grady would be proud to hear this story? I don't know. He might lose respect for me. He says the law is the law and it's his duty to enforce it. I can't argue with that.

Well, maybe I will tell him. But not yet. I'll wait until I figure he's had enough experience to know that nothing in life is black and white. The laws of the land and the laws of the street are there for good reason, but they don't cover every situation.

Tomorrow? Sure. And it'll be your turn to buy the coffee.

FEBRUARY

Yesterday
you gave me spring,
seductive sun heat,
forsythia, camellia, primula,
yellow daffodils,
sweet scents and grass thrusting
into golden light.

Today
you hurl bitter winds,
fill my sky with sleet,
chill my blood,
drown new-risen hope.

The sea lies gray and sullen.
and so do I.

THIS JAR

This jar is a prairie jar,
stolid glass,
square and plain,
holds a gallon of
anything.

This jar is old,
been a lot of places,
held a lot of things:

Summer strawberries, warm with sun,
Yellow cornmeal,
Ground wheat,
Nuts and bolts and bent nails,
Ginger snaps,
Pickled beets,
Macaroni,
Navy beans,
Buttons,
Brown flour, going north to the Peace,
Spice cans, south to California.

This jar
lives on a West Coast island now,
had meant to retire and
sit on a warm shelf, dozing.
Instead, it holds bright beach pebbles,
a million years of history.

THE BELLS OF HELL

The storm was sweeping down the west coast from Alaska, according to the weather woman on the evening news. I could well believe her. An icy wind whistled in the trees and flung large flakes of snow through the failing light. An hour later the snow was squalling out of a black sky, thick and heavy.

But, when I awoke in the morning, the village lay silent and still under a pale shroud.

When he saw I was awake, Sam leapt off the bed, his pathetic meowing designed to convince me that he was starving to death. Sam is black, with a white chest and white feet, and so fond of lolling on his back to get his fat belly rubbed, that I often wonder how he survived in the back alley where I found him, skinny and starving.

I eased my arthritic bones into motion, fed Sam and opened the back door for him. He inserted one delicate paw into the drifted snow and jumped back as though he'd been bitten. He gave me a dirty look and trotted into the living room to see if I'd made it snow on the other side of the house.

"You don't want to go out, anyway," I called. "Tilly would have you in a flash. She's got longer legs."

My neighbor's rambunctious black Doberman was nowhere in sight, but the heavy snow had broken boughs off my prize rhododendrons and forced the lower branches of two fir trees to the ground. Fifty feet away, driftwood on the beach lay in white mounds like new graves. An ominous dark gray sky hung over the burnished steel of the ocean.

I made coffee and dressed. The house was bathed in an eerie gray light, and I strained to hear some sound from the muffled world outside, then realized the road was empty of traffic. I could take my time with coffee; no clients were likely to turn up this morning.

It doesn't snow much on Vancouver Island, but every year we get two or three storms, tying up traffic because people don't know how to drive in wet snow. Snowplows are in short supply; taxpayers don't want to pay for them to sit idle fifty weeks of the year. Some roads get plowed, but the rest stay clogged up until the snow melts. This storm was late—it was almost mid-March—and the clouds overhead were dark and menacing.

Hot coffee brought back a sense of normality. I put on boots and jacket and ventured out, leaving Sam sitting in the front window with a reproachful look on his face. The daffodils, tulips and primulas that only yesterday had blazed color along my driveway were buried. The snow lay a foot deep, unmarked by footprint or tire track. Not even Mrs. Kirkpatrick's Tilly had come from next door to spray yellow stains on the pristine white carpet.

You'd think widow ladies living next door to each other would get along, but Mrs. Kirkpatrick and I were barely on speaking terms. Her Tilly chased my Sam and, when I complained, Mrs. Kirkpatrick accused Sam of teasing the dog. Not only that, Tilly messed on my lawn and dug up my flower beds. And Mrs. Kirkpatrick let her dandelions go to seed. It didn't do my arthritis any good to be down on my knees pulling up new dandelion plants.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick seemed to have visitors every day and I was forever having to phone and ask them not to block my driveway. Her son from the mainland visited every month or so and he was just as rude and loud as his mother.

Of course, I knew why so many people came to see her. She advertised fresh, organic strawberry jam and usually had a tray of the little jars with their fancy labels sitting on her front veranda. But I'd seen the big restaurant-sized jam tins in her garbage can and I knew that all she

did was fill the little jars from those.

Anyway, it's hard to be friends with someone who hogs all the conversation. Mrs. Kirkpatrick talked so much, when she wasn't tending to her never-ending stream of callers, that I rarely got a word in edgewise.

Last week had been the worst. Tilly chased Sam, who clawed the Dobie's nose before he escaped up a cedar tree. The way Mrs. Kirkpatrick had gone on about a few drops of blood on her precious dog's nose, you'd have thought Tilly was dying. I offered to take Tilly to the vet, but privately I thought Sam should get a medal.

The neighborhood was peaceful this morning, though. So far. I had a sudden urge to flop on the lawn and make a snow angel. Or walk the beach, watching snow slide off firs and cedars. It would be soothing to meditate on the ocean whispering like silk beside me while smoke from village chimneys drifted up into a clearing sky.

I quit teasing myself with thoughts of playing hooky and grabbed the snow shovel. I didn't want to, my knees being the way they are, but the village snowplow wouldn't get here until at least noon. The long, half-moon driveway is a big job. It curves in front of the old garage I'd converted to an office, then across the lot past the house and the new carport before exiting to the street. For now, though, I'd just do the strip from the office to the street in case any clients turned up after lunch.

I couldn't afford to lose business. My old house was built back in the twenties as a summer retreat for city people but, unlike houses, beach frontage doesn't get cheaper as it ages. My bookkeeping jobs didn't quite pay the mortgage and I worked at almost anything to make a dollar: typing, tax returns, you-name-it. My half-basement wasn't big enough to convert to a rental suite and, anyway, I need my privacy. It was all worth it, though; in spite of the house being creaky, leaky, and infested with carpenter ants, I loved the place.

After clearing half the strip, I went in for coffee and found Sam back in bed. Cats often have more sense than people. After a yearning glance at the beach, where the smooth sea lapped against snow-buried beach pebbles, I sighed and put my boots back on. The shovel awaited.

As I stepped out, I saw Mrs. Kirkpatrick standing halfway down the concrete walk leading from her big old house, clutching her own snow shovel, and making odd little squeaking noises. I'd slogged to within twenty feet of her before I realized the snow-covered lump Mrs. Kirkpatrick was poking with her shovel looked like a body.

I hurried the last few yards, slipping and sliding in the snow, my heart fluttering up into my throat.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick stared at the form under the snow, her usual torrential flow of words halted. Snowed under, I thought irreverently; a miracle wrought by the storm.

"We'd better call the police," I said.

"He might still be alive," Mrs. Kirkpatrick said. "Hell's bells, he could be dead by the time them buggers get here. We gotta call an ambulance."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick had spent most of her life cooking in logging and float camps and I'm told cooks in such places have to be tough. I was sure she could outshout a bunch of loggers; she'd proved more than once she could shout louder than anyone I'd ever heard. She was no slouch at giving a spade its proper name either.

I knelt, removed a glove, and touched the only visible part of the body, a blunt-nailed hand with black hair growing on the back. The flesh was like ice. The only pulse I could feel was my own, pumping through numbed fingers.

"He's dead. No need for an ambulance."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick edged a foot closer. "Well, let's dig the bugger out. Somebody cashes in his chips on my property, I got a right to know who it is."

"Don't touch him," I said. "The police won't like it."

"You phone them then. I don't like cops. They're always poking their noses into decent people's business when they should be out catching criminals."

"The body's on your property. I think you should make the call."

"Hell's bells!"

Her exclamation reminded me of the old RAF First World War song called *The Bells of Hell* that my grandfather used to sing. I could remember only the first four lines: the bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling, for you but not for me, and the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling, for you but not for me. I wondered if Mrs. Kirkpatrick had picked up the words from the song or from the men she'd known in the logging camps.

She finally stumped back to her veranda, letting Tilly out when she opened the front door.

The big black dog headed straight for me, growling.

"Don't be a darn fool," I said. "It's me, Alice."

Tilly stopped, sniffed, and wagged her tail. Then, before I could stop her, she began pawing at the body, dislodging its quilt of snow.

"Hey, cut that out!" I grabbed her collar and dragged her away.

When I saw the corpse's face, my heart jumped with a painful thud, and I nearly screamed. It was young Jack Dodds, one of my clients from the city ten miles down the coast. I couldn't see any blood, but a mickey of rye whiskey had fallen out of his jacket pocket. As I struggled to hold the excited dog, an icy breeze came off the ocean and a few snowflakes drifted down. Dark clouds were moving in again.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick, her grey hair now tucked under a garish red and blue toque, emerged from her house.

"You'd better put Tilly inside," I said. "She won't leave the body alone."

"Tilly, sit!" she roared.

To my amazement, Tilly sat.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick glared at me. She'd have told me to sit if she thought she could get away with it. "Tilly's a damn fine dog," she said. "Well-trained, if I do say so myself." She gave me another look. "All dogs chase cats."

"Uh huh." I pointed at the almost empty mickey. "Maybe he was drunk and got hit by a car."

"Could be. Road would have been slippery." She picked up her snow shovel. "I guess if a car hit him hard enough, it could have flung him up here."

A blue and white RCMP cruiser roared along the street in second gear, spraying snow. Sergeant Drake and Constable Prosofsky pulled to the side of the road, piled out and hurried over. Drake and my husband had been great buddies and I'd worked with both cops at Rotary Club auctions. Prosofsky and I bowled together on a regular basis. Drake placed his fingers against the victim's throat, then nodded at the constable. "Call the doc. And get Terry down here to photograph the scene." Prosofsky headed back to the car and started talking on the radio.

Drake began writing in his notebook. He asked whether we'd seen or heard anything. We said we hadn't.

"Either of you know the victim?"

"Never saw him before in my life," Mrs. Kirkpatrick shouted. "What's the bugger doing on my lawn, that's what I want to know."

Before I could open my mouth, two more cars pulled up. Sergeant Drake said, "You ladies

go inside. I'll talk to you later."

I thought about inviting Mrs. Kirkpatrick over to my office for coffee but decided against it. She might bring the dog—Tilly went everywhere with her—and Sam would never forgive me for that.

When Sergeant Drake arrived at my office after lunch, the wind was moaning through the cedars and snow was falling heavily again. I wasn't sure if my shivering was caused by the cold, the Sergeant, or the fact I'd have to shovel the driveway again. He kicked the snow off his boots, came in and plunked down by my desk. I gave him a mug of coffee and some cookies.

"Looks like the victim died just before the snow started coming down heavy last night," Drake said. "You ever seen him going into the Kirkpatrick house?"

I shook my head no. "We thought he might have been hit by a car."

Drake shook his head. "Looks like an overdose."

"An overdose!" I said, shocked.

"Yeah. We found a vial of GHB in his pocket. Almost empty, so he'd likely taken too much. Been drinking, too. He's not the first to die from that combination."

"What's GHB?"

"On the street it's called Liquid E and Fantasy and a bunch of other names. You might know it as date rape drug."

"I've read about that being used down in the States. Didn't think it would turn up around here."

Drake nodded, his face grim. "Oh, yeah. Just a matter of time. It's easy to make."

"That's horrible! Chemicals are so dangerous. I always use real manure on my plant beds."

Drake held his mug out for a refill of coffee. "You and Mrs. Kirkpatrick good buddies?"

"No."

He raised his eyebrows. "You live right next door."

"Doesn't mean we have to like each other." I explained about the feud between Tilly and Sam and said that Mrs. Kirkpatrick's visitors were a nuisance, cars coming and going at all hours and parking in my driveway. I knew I shouldn't—news gets around the village fast and she might lose business—but I told him about the fake jam, too.

The sergeant stared at the ceiling for a second and said, "Hmm." Then he drained his coffee and stood up. "Okay, that's it for now."

I watched through the front window as he tramped around to Mrs. Kirkpatrick's door. She didn't seem to want to let him in. They talked at the front door until he put one of his big boots inside and pushed his way into her hall.

Why had Jack been using something as lethal as GHB? He'd been coming to me for close to ten years and hadn't seemed the type to risk his life for a high.

Next morning was calm, the snow melting under a sunny blue sky. I went to the office, Sam trotting at my heels, wondering if my flowers would survive the storm's battering. I nursed a coffee while I waited for a client and Sam spat through the window at Tilly, who was watering my lilac bush.

An RCMP cruiser stopped outside Mrs. Kirkpatrick's and ten minutes later two cops marched her down the sidewalk. She was bellowing but the only two words I could make out were 'hells bells!' What was going on? Surely they wouldn't arrest her for making fake strawberry jam.

After my client had come and gone, I reached for the phone. When I got Sergeant Drake on the line, I said, "Why did you take Mrs. Kirkpatrick away?"

"You'll find this hard to believe, Alice, but her house was a storefront for hard drugs."

"Mrs. Kirkpatrick? Drugs?"

"Yep. She had one hell of a stash in her basement. All kinds of stuff. Including GHB."

Drake's tone was exuberant. "And we figured out who her supplier is. Her son on the mainland!"

We talked a while longer about the amazing things people do and how you never know what's under the surface until something trips them up.

I put the phone down, went into the house and sat in my chair with a gin and tonic, never mind that it was the middle of the day. I said to Sam, "You just never know."

Sam looked contented, as if he'd guessed Tilly would soon be going away. To the SPCA, probably. Mrs. Kirkpatrick's son would soon be in jail, too.

I joined Sam at the window. Black clouds were building up again, casting a shadow over Mrs. Kirkpatrick's house. I wondered if she hated being in jail as much as I would.

"The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling," I whispered, "for you but not for me."

I slipped down the basement stairs and stood for a long time, gazing at the hundred or so flourishing marijuana plants under their grow lights. Mortgage or no mortgage, I'd have to burn them and dispose of the evidence, the sooner the better.

The bells of hell had rung for Mrs. Kirkpatrick. They weren't going to ring for me!



QUITTING

I have spent one entire
sparkling morning
sprawling in a deck chair,
sipping on a latte,
breathing the freshness of May,
listening to the bees murmur,
gazing into the clear blue sky,
letting the sun warm me,
reading love poems.

I haven't had one single
cigarette.

I think I'll die.

FISHING EXPEDITION

The final warning letter from the bank arrived one morning in mid-March. I read it right there in the hall, heart pounding, lungs desperate for air they couldn't seem to find. If I didn't pay the mortgage arrears within thirty days, the bank would foreclose. It was no good pleading with them; I'd already tried that. I opened the front door, craving fresh air and a quiet place to rack my brains for another solution. Delivering their mail to my boarders could wait.

"Mary!" Mrs. Taylor, wrapped in a lilac mohair shawl, creaked out of the elevator on her cane. "Going for a walk, dear? It's such a beautiful spring day." Her faded blue eyes twinkled up at me. "May I come, too? As senior oldie around here, I think I'm entitled to special privileges."

I hesitated. Mrs. Taylor could talk the hind leg off a donkey, and I needed to think, not listen. But she's one of my favorites and sharp enough to know it. I felt sorry for her, too. It must be awful depending on other people all the time.

"Of course, you can," I said. "I'm only going to sit on the bench and watch the birds, though."

"Oh, Mary, you are a dear. I love watching birds."

What she loves is company; she doesn't know beans about birds. She took my arm, and we walked past my daffodil border to the front gate. Pink and blue hyacinths were in bloom, their scent so strong in the warm air that I could smell them even after we were out on the Keyhole walkway.

My favorite bench, a few feet from the gate, is on the broad paved path that borders Keyhole Narrows for a mile or more. I like to spend an hour there every day, if I can, watching the birds and mulling over my problems. Afternoon is best. That's when the oldies are busy with naps or outings and the ones who can still swing a golf club are putting on the greens.

My problems were beyond mulling now. If I couldn't stop the bank from foreclosing, I'd lose my lovely house and end up in some poky basement suite with nothing to do but wait for my old age pension to start. A life like that, I might as well go lie beside Charlie in the graveyard and pull the dirt up over me. My oldies would have to leave, too, and where else would they find a real home to live in with somebody who cared enough to listen when they recited their aches and pains every day? Nowhere, that's where.

Keyhole Narrows is a long, meandering saltwater inlet and here, half a mile from the Pacific Ocean, it's less than a couple of hundred feet wide. There are always fish for the birds to catch and now millions of herring were coming up to spawn. Cormorants and blue herons nested in the Douglas firs and cedars in the park directly across the Narrows from my place, though many of the ducks that had spent the winter here were headed north now.

Charlie and I used to watch the birds in the Narrows. He'd be spinning in his grave if he knew the state I'd got myself into. He wouldn't buy a house—too much hassle, he said—and we lived in apartments all our married life. Whenever we walked along here and saw the big old Victorian mansion with its bay windows, little turrets and a thousand nooks and crannies, I wanted it so bad I could have cried.

Mrs. Taylor, maybe reading my mind, squirmed around to look at the mansion. "I'll never forget the day my son brought me here. Such a blessing. The owner of the other home I was in—you know the one, dear—only cared about getting his checks every month. And that woman he hired to keep us entertained acted like we were children. You wouldn't think a young person could be so officious."

She turned to the inlet again, knocking her cane off the bench. "I feel so very lucky to be living here now."

She's only told me this about a thousand times, but it makes me feel good each time I hear it. "Me, too," I said, picking up her cane and resting the crook near her hand. But how long would our luck last?

A bank of white fog lay over the ocean, the top just visible beyond the park trees, but the sky above was clear blue and the sun so warm my rhododendrons would be bursting into bloom any minute. Forsythia was already bright yellow along the south side of the house, matching the daffodils by the front walk. Could I fend off the bank long enough to see the chrysanthemums and dahlias bloom in the fall?

It had been fall when the mansion came on the market, a few months after Charlie died. I knew I was a fool for even talking to the real estate man, but when I learned the money Charlie left would cover the down payment, I couldn't stop myself. I was scared spitless, but it was my one chance to have what I'd always wanted. Now it looked like I was going to lose it.

I tried to give my worries a rest by watching the Narrows. The tide was slack, the glassy water mirroring blue sky and trees along the far side. Coots, widgeons, and buffleheads paddled lazily in the center of the inlet and mallards cruised near the banks, looking for handouts from people on the walkway. A few cormorants glided down for a landing, their braking feet speckling the glossy surface of the Narrows with sprays of water. They headed upstream and began diving for fish.

I like cormorants. People who think their long necks and black feathers are ugly aren't paying proper attention. Close up, their plumage has glints of dark green and purple. They're supposed to be greedy, too, but I don't know where that idea came from. We all have to eat.

"Look, Mary, one of those black birds just came up with a fish in its beak."

"It's a herring, I expect." I was finding it hard to keep my mind on Mrs. Taylor or the birds.

I knew when I bought the house, I'd have to rent out rooms to pay the whacking great mortgage. Turned out the best bet was to take in seniors and give them bed and board, though I wasn't keen at the time. I figured looking after a bunch of old crocks would be a constant reminder that I'd soon be an old crock myself.

It worked out fine, though. Sure, there've been a few oldies miserable enough to make a cat cry, but on the whole they're a great bunch. If I'm as lucky as some, I've got plenty of good years left.

"Too bad there aren't any seals today," Mrs. Taylor said. "They're so sweet, like teddy bears with no ears."

The week before, the paper had a piece about some resident sighting a sea monster. I figure what he saw was a seal rolling around just under the surface of the water. The inlet isn't deep enough for what you'd call a sea monster but the kind of person who dreams about discovering a west coast Nessie doesn't care much about reality.

Of course, the oldies who live along the Narrows are always looking for some excitement and a sea monster right at their front door will do fine if there's nothing else. There are dozens of big apartment houses full of retired people and two seniors' homes besides my own along the Narrows. Every day the walkway is full of people walking, shuffling, or rolling along in their wheelchairs, some of them looking pretty bored.

I'd had more excitement than I wanted the last couple of years. First, the health inspector said I had to upgrade the kitchen, or he'd take away my license, so the last of my savings account got wiped out and I had to struggle with bigger mortgage payments. Then four of my oldies

passed away, one right after another, and I couldn't meet the payments. What I needed—fast—were four new residents to fill up the empty rooms so I could get the bank off my back. It seemed pretty hopeless. There are a lot of seniors in this city but the competition to look after them is fierce.

Birds compete, too. Across the Narrows was a big blue heron, standing on thin, spindly legs in about a foot of water, long neck curved downward, head bent to the side and one beady eye peering into the water. How they can stand still like that for so long, I don't know, but they do. Out in the center of the inlet, between me and the heron, the cormorants dove all at once, like they were run by a single brain. Thirty seconds later the heron stabbed his beak into the water and came up with a silvery, squirming little fish. He raised his beak, flipped the fish around until its head was pointing down his throat, and swallowed.

Mrs. Taylor and I watched birds until it was time for me to help the cook get lunch started. That hour on the bench did me some good after all. The birds had given me an idea I was itching to try, but it would have to wait a few days.

The regular meeting of the Association of Rest Home and Seniors' Home Owners was on a Tuesday night. We'd all been crying the blues for months because of a lack of customers. I stood up and said, "I've got a suggestion. What we should do is get more aggressive in going after clients."

"Ha!" said Mrs. MacKay, owner of the seniors' home down the street from me, her chins quivering. "Aggressive costs dollars. I can't afford to put out more money for ads."

A babble of voices agreed with her.

"My idea won't cost any money," I said.

The faces around the table swiveled to stare at me in disbelief.

"Look," I said, "there are thousands of retirees living in apartments all over the city. On any given day, a couple hundred of them are out strolling on the Narrows walkway. They're all potential customers, right?"

"Right," someone said doubtfully.

"Okay, so what we need to do is get out there with our brochures and business cards, maybe even some small signs, and talk to every one of those people. If your place of business is right on the walkway, like mine, you can even drag them inside to have a look at the facilities."

"All too easy for you, Mrs. Fisher," Mr. Bradley snapped. "What about those of us on the other side of the city? Or downtown?"

"What are cars for? If you're on the walkway handing out brochures, your car will be parked on the street. So, grab a couple of hot ones and drive them over to your place. Won't cost you anything but gas."

Nobody said a word for a few minutes. The next thing, everybody was talking at once. By the end of the meeting, it was agreed we'd all be out on the walkway the following Sunday, the most popular day for strolling, with our brochures, signs, and anything else we thought might lure the oldies.

The following four days I was too busy to watch birds. I polished furniture and the walnut banisters on the wide curving staircase that the oldies rarely used, though they were always saying how much they loved it and how you never see stairways like that anymore. I even scrubbed the elevator from top to bottom; the smell of soap and water is the smell of home. The cleaning lady washed the antique china plates and put them back on the plate rail in the living room while I vacuumed the red velvet curtains and polished the brass. The final touch was getting up on a stepladder to wash the windows, including all those fiddly little stained-glass

panels. Someday I suppose I'll have to depend on somebody else to do it, but I don't have to think about that yet.

One thing I'd thought of was letting the cleaning lady and the two part-time cooks go, but there's no way I can look after a three-story house and twelve people—sixteen if all the rooms are full—by myself. Anyway, what I'd save on their wages wouldn't make up the shortage on the mortgage payments.

Late afternoons and evenings I worked in the garden. If I do say so myself, my rhododendrons are the best in the street, maybe even the city. The blooms were opening in soft shades of pink, rose, mauve and white. Primroses shone red, yellow, and purple blue against velvety green grass. When the garden was as neat as I could make it, I scrubbed the wrought iron benches and tables scattered beside the path that goes all the way around the house.

The sight of my cozy-looking, turreted house painted a warm sand color and trimmed with forest green, and the garden glowing with color made me feel good. Who wouldn't want to live here? The other two seniors' homes on my street are fairly new, but they're stucco and concrete boxes. Not places I'd ever want to live, even if one of them does have a sauna and the other a games room. Their gardens are laughable; a bit of lawn and a few ornamental cedars. No color or life at all.

Sunday morning the cook promised to have fresh bread coming out of the oven by early afternoon and I put a pot of water laced with cinnamon on the stove to simmer. There's nothing like the hint of cinnamon buns to make people feel at home. Not that we don't have fresh cinnamon buns maybe once a week or so, but we never make them on Sunday. Most of my oldies go out that day.

At two, I crossed my fingers for luck and sat on my bench as usual. Along the walkway, Mrs. McKay, dressed in her best purple with a white carnation pinned to her front, was trying to steer a couple of oldies up her sidewalk. They didn't seem too keen.

A little later Mr. Bradley, looking irritable but elegant in a pin stripe suit, his hair slicked back like in a 30's movie, stopped beside me. "Where are your brochures? Don't you even have any cards?"

"I've been under the weather, so I decided not to bother this time. How are you making out?"

"Not very well. There's a lot of resistance for some reason," he muttered, and walked away. As he bore down on a white-haired woman in a wheelchair, I could see the muscles in his cheeks stiffen to force a smile.

Ten minutes later the couple who'd been in Mrs. McKay's clutches came wandering along, holding hands like they really meant it and conferring in indignant tones.

"Nice afternoon," I said.

They looked at me suspiciously. I gave them my best smile and dropped my gaze to the book open in my lap.

"It would be," the man said, "if it weren't for all those sharks trying to sell us space in seniors' homes. City council should do something about people like that, ruining our afternoon walks. I've a good mind to write a letter."

"I wouldn't blame you a bit," I said. "I run a home for seniors myself, but I'd never stoop to soliciting. That's tacky."

They looked at me, then at my cozy mansion with its stained-glass window panels, and the garden blooming in all shades of the rainbow. "That your place?" the man asked.

"Yes," I said, and picked up my book again.

"Well," the woman said, tucking a strand of white hair behind her ear, "it's true we're

thinking of moving but we certainly aren't going to let ourselves be pushed into anything." She glanced at the house again. "Do you have any double units available?"

"As it happens, I do. Drop around sometime when you're free and I'll give you the grand tour."

"Why not now?" the man said. "Can we do it now?"

Within half an hour they'd signed up. By six o'clock, I'd signed up another couple and two singles. My home was finally full, and my mortgage worries had shot to the bottom of the Narrows like a cormorant after herring.

After dinner that evening, I went out to my bench again, this time with a glass of something that looked like water but wasn't. Vodka, actually. Celebration time.

The bare branches of dead trees were loaded with cormorants, their wings spread and drying, but a few came flying along the inlet, swooping to land on the water and cruise the far side of Keyhole Narrows. As the sun slipped down behind the hills, the clouds turned to peach and gold, their reflection broken and shimmering on the darkening blue water. A few seconds after the cormorants dove, the blue heron on the far side gulped down a fish. The cormorants surfaced, paddled across the Narrows to my side and began working their way back upstream.

As I'd known he would, the heron lumbered into the air on his great wings and flapped lazily across the Narrows to splash into the water a few yards from me. When the cormorants dove a few feet from him, he speared another fish.

"Thanks for the idea, old buddy!" I raised my glass to him. "I guess depending on somebody else to do things for you isn't so bad after all."

How long had it taken him to learn that the greedy, energetic cormorants would scare fish in his direction? I'd learned just in time.



GREY FOG

Grey heavy fog
smothers the coast.
The wind is dead,
the sun drowned
in rain too tired
to fall.
Mist tendrils creep
like ghosts
through silent forests.

Summer must be a dream
I once had.

DEVON VIOLETS

There's nothing like a funeral for resurrecting memories best interred with the corpse. On the way to my sister's wake, my mother said, "Jane, do you remember how lovely she was as a baby?"

How could I forget? Tamara had gurgled, smiled, and charmed her way through babyhood. Growing up, she became more beautiful every year. The trouble was, she knew it.

"I put violets on her casket," my mother said. "She loved them so. Remember the Devon Violets perfume you gave her, Jane? I'd like to have it as a memento. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. You deserve it, Mom."

"Such a sweet, loving little girl." My mother blotted tears with a lace-edged hanky. "And she never changed."

"People always said it was hard to believe you and Tammy were sisters," said my uncle Harry from the back seat.

I knew my parents had been as disappointed in me as they were delighted with Tamara. She never cried; I had colic and howled endlessly my first year. I made up for it in the years that followed by keeping my emotions hidden, no matter how painful.

"We used to call you Plain Jane," Harry added.

"Did you? I'd forgotten."

A lie. I could still hear Tamara chanting, "Plain Jane! Plain Jane!" when we were alone. But I learned to love books and delight in stretching my mental muscles. It never crossed my mind that Tamara might catch up to me.

"Tamara always got what she wanted," Harry said. "She was real sweet about it, though. Used to give me big smooches when I let her take change out of my pocket." He sighed. "A real tragedy, her dying so young. None of us ever guessed she had a weak heart."

When my parents said they couldn't afford to send me to university my dreams died. For a few weeks I mourned, then resurrected them with a job and night school. At twenty-six I had a biochemistry degree and a job in the university.

On her eighteenth birthday Tamara said, "Guess what Mom and Dad are giving me for my big present?" In our family, 'big' presents are for special birthdays like the eighteenth. "They're sending me to university!" She smiled. "Too bad you had to work so hard for it."

I forgot my bitterness about Tamara when I fell in love with James, a handsome, clever history professor. Our first shy kiss astonished me with the discovery that my body was as eager for excitement as my mind.

James proposed and I took him home to meet my family. They welcomed him with their usual charm, and he was touched to be accepted so readily. Tamara, achieving top grades, seemed fascinated by James's discourses on ancient history.

Two months later my mother found the note and handed it to me wordlessly. James and Tamara had eloped, were honeymooning in California, and would return in three weeks.

At work, I tried to ignore the whispers and probing questions. At home, I smiled and said that if James and Tamara were happy nothing else mattered. My mother patted my arm and told me I was a rock.

When they returned, Tamara wept in my arms, begging me to forgive her. What else could I do? She was my baby sister. But she wore James like the laurel crown of a conquering Roman general.

She gave James three winsome children and acted the part of dedicated mother and faculty wife. I won my doctorate, tenure as a professor, and more time for research. Life was full, but not in the way I had hoped.

At the wake James, graying and dignified, stood beside us to greet the mourners. "Jane, you're the only one who understands how I feel," he said. "I'll never forget her."

Nor would I forget my fiftieth birthday, three months past, another 'special' day in our family. My mother, for the first time, gave me something luxurious and impractical, a bottle of expensive perfume called Devon Violets. I don't know why; I never use makeup or perfume.

The white porcelain vial, hand-painted with purple violets and green leaves, was small and dainty. The slender neck, decorated with a mauve ribbon bow, curved outward, then inward again to the base, almost a perfect sphere. The perfume had a gentle, elusive scent.

Tamara was very taken with my gift. "What an exquisite bottle!" She dabbed perfume on her wrist and smelled the fragrance. "It's enchanting. I hope you'll use it." She knew I wouldn't. I knew she wanted to.

At lunch a month later, my mother said, "I tried to get you some Devon Violets, Tammy, but they're not making it anymore. Jane's was the last bottle available."

I thought about the elegant vial gracing my dresser. It was nice to have something no one else had.

A few weeks later I successfully completed a lab experiment I'd been working on and was indulging in quiet elation and a glass of Glenfiddich scotch when my mother called.

"Tammy's feeling blue, dear. Why don't you drop around and see her? And I know it would cheer her up if you gave her your Devon Violets."

Why not? Tamara had taken everything else I'd wanted. She might as well have the little bottle of perfume to complete her collection.

She immediately put some on her wrists, in the hollow of her throat and behind her ears. She held her wrist up to my face. "It really suits me, doesn't it?" The scent of violets was as delicate as the touch of summer rain drops on fragile petals.

During the following weeks, whenever we met, Tamara moved in the soft aura of Devon Violets. The perfume was being absorbed through her skin into her bloodstream like rain nourishing the roots of a plant.

Only I knew about the odorless, undetectable poison being carried with it.



PERFECT ME

The image of the perfect me
flows into words so often dreamed.
The image of the real me
is clearly defined
there in the mirror of my mind.

She is the one who
never smokes cigarettes
(maybe a little grass on weekends)
never eats french fries
(without ketchup)
drinks only red wine
(but any kind of rum)
during the full moon
(the glass one hanging from the ceiling)
and writes
(letters to friends)
all the time.

She is the one who
eats brown rice
(with roast pork and potatoes)
and nettle soup
(on alternate February 31sts)
makes her own bread
(when the store doesn't have any)
walks on the beach
(on perfect sunny days)
does yoga every day
(mentally...isn't it the thought that counts?)
and writes (lists)
and writes (get-well cards)
and writes (inter-office memos).

She is the one who
is slim and gay
(under all that sulky fat)
and graceful
(when no one is looking)
assertive
(why are there footprints on her chest?)
but kind and loving
(when there's time)

and writes (thank-you notes)
and writes (recipes)
and writes (bad poetry).

I'd like to play Alice and move
to the other side of the mirror.

ONE SATURDAY IN JUNE

Kevin hunches over his desk marking essays. The sun scorching the flat roof a few feet overhead is turning the cramped room into an oven and his head into jelly. He pushes hair off his forehead and tries not to think about the heat.

Sweat trickles down his face into his beard. It would be sensible to shave it off for the summer, especially since the summer promises to be hot. But he is reluctant. He grew it as a celebration of his new status as a teacher and has yet to decide if the symbol will provide enough satisfaction to justify the discomfort.

He frowns at the essay in front of him. He will have to speak to Chuck again about his approach. All year he has been emphasizing the value of objectivity and rationality, logic if you like, in solving problems. In class Chuck nods at him as if he understands, but the essay does not exhibit any understanding. Still, he hadn't expected to be able to reach all of them.

He unfolds his bony frame and goes to look out the window. The humidity is rising though the sun beats down relentlessly. He does not like this kind of pressure; he is used to desert air. The room feels too small. He wants to stretch out his arms and push the walls away. But he won't be living in this room much longer. His contract will be renewed, with a higher salary, and in September he and Elaine will move to a larger apartment, perhaps one with air conditioning. Everything in due course, he thinks.

Kevin opens the window; there may be a breeze. But the only thing that invades the room is the high-pitched whine of a child's toy, down in the suburban street. It grates across his mind; it makes his skin feel itchy. He scowls. He has always had an antipathy to high-pitched sound. It has never been important enough to analyze and is not now. An irritation on the edge of the moment, nothing more.

He returns to his desk and the essays. Heat can be endured, can be ignored, by exercise of the will. He considers taking his shirt off. No, Elaine would not like that. Her slob of a father sits on his porch drinking beer, bare belly slopping over into his lap, and she has a silly obsession about it. But he has given up trying to convince her that such obsessions are controllable. She refuses to change, and he does not wish to upset her.

He begins at the first paragraph again, then senses a small movement somewhere to his right. He turns his head but can see nothing. Probably a dust fleck, although he has already dusted this afternoon. He stretches back, arms over his head, and yawns. Rubs his face vigorously with both hands. Maybe a run around the block—but no, not in this heat. He stares up at the ceiling. A barely perceptible movement snags at the periphery of his vision. He inspects the room with care but sees nothing except cracked white plaster. Irritably he turns back to his papers. Perhaps it is the heat; perhaps he has been straining his eyes.

But there it is again, a kind of flicker right across his line of vision this time. Holding his breath, he tracks it. A tiny long-legged insect lands on the wall in front of him. Ahhh! A mosquito! Small swell of relief—such a simple answer. And, inexplicable, a tightness, a rising panic in his throat. He shakes his head like a dog, trying to free himself of the feeling. Silly. It's just a mosquito. Merely an insect. The insect skims off, then appears to float on the heat waves, and comes to rest by the open window.

He decides he must eliminate this interruption to his work. He strides to the window, closes it, and slaps at the insect with the palm of his hand. The mosquito moves just a split second faster and floats up to the ceiling. Kevin pulls his chair out, stands on it, and aims another smack at the mosquito. Again, it escapes by a fraction of an inch.

He gets down off the chair, feeling angrier than he thinks is justified. Then the thing begins its high-pitched hum and long-forgotten memories flood into his mind. His skin prickles.

Mosquitoes. Clouds of mosquitoes rising from damp marshes in summer evenings. A small boy in shorts forgetting that he is allergic to insect bites and coming in at dusk with red welts rising all over his body. The welts itching and burning, he scratches and scratches until they bleed, until his whole body feels raw. Trying to sleep in the cot under the weight of the muggy heat, pushing the blanket off first, then the sheet, unable to sleep for the heat and the endless itching. Finally drifting off, his swollen flesh quieted, and from out of the darkness comes the whining of a single mosquito, piercing his brain, bringing him upright in the bed, frantic with terror. Grabbing the sheet, wrapping himself up in it, from head to toe, his head under the damp pillow. Can't breathe, can't hear; gives in and puts his head out. Still there, a gentle whining, an insistent drone that seems to say I'm coming, I'm coming, give in, don't fight me. Scared and furious, he crawls out of bed, stumbles to the switch. Light floods the room, blinds him; he stubs his toe on the bed. Eyes squeezed shut in agony, he nurses the afflicted foot. Then erect, shaking, he searches the room. There it goes, flitting across the ceiling, seeming so innocent, minding its own business. He can't find a weapon. And now it's it gone. He can't see it anywhere. He runs back and forth, shaking curtains, knocking things over, looking, looking. There is silence. Oh, it is too much! He cannot bear the frustration; flings himself on the bed and cries despairingly until exhaustion and sleep overtake him.

In the morning he has more welts. He is sure they bite him through the sheets. He is sure, too, that they know about him, know that they can torment him almost beyond endurance. Perhaps his blood is special. Perhaps they prefer his blood to anyone else's. There is something about the way they are always there that makes him sure they know exactly where to find him. He thinks it is unfair that he should be singled out for this torture. His mother tries to explain about allergies. She sprays his room, puts a mixture of baking soda and alcohol on the welts. She tells him she cannot keep him locked up in an air-tight box.

He does not believe the allergy theory. They know about him, that's all. And they always find him.

He screams at them, thinking that his size, his weight is a greater power than theirs. But it doesn't work, and he cannot understand it. They are so tiny, almost weightless. How can they be so powerful? How can they know all the things they know?

Then he is grown-up Kevin again, standing in his study, shaking his head. Where have all these memories come from? He hasn't thought about mosquitoes for years. He guesses he hasn't been bitten by one in as long. His family moved later that year, he remembers, to the desert. But this year he is back again in a damp green climate.

So, there is a mosquito in my room, he thinks. So what? I will kill it. Simple problem, simple solution.

But what will I do about the others? They will smell my blood. They will all come here. He feels himself shrinking inside his skin.

And curses angrily. What a ridiculous thought! Simply habit from all those years ago. He has to eradicate such habits. And create a logical plan of action to control the physical situation. Then he can relax. As soon as the essay marking is done, he will get some insect spray and buy screens for all the windows. He will wear long-sleeved shirts, and insect repellent on his skin until the summer is over. In the meantime, there is still a mosquito in the room, and the first thing he must do is to kill it and exorcize all the old fears.

He looks at the mosquito still perched lightly on the ceiling and considers the problem. His

hand is not a good weapon; it does not give him enough range. He needs something longer and more flexible. He remembers his mother using rolled up newspapers, but his are stacked by his chair down in the living room, and he does not want to go and get one in case the mosquito moves into hiding. He might then have to waste hours searching for it or waiting for it to reappear. The tidy bookshelves do not offer much help; a hard-bound book would be too awkward, and soft-covers are not big enough. But there, on the desk, is a pile of his students' essays. Perhaps not the best weapon, but several of these should be adequate. He rolls up a suitable thickness of paper and smacks his hand several times to test the flexibility. Assured of the weapon's efficiency, he climbs back up on the chair rather gingerly, so as not to disturb the insect, and takes careful aim. The mosquito floats out from under the descending papers and settles down again just out of range.

Jaws tensing, Kevin climbs down, moves the chair over, and repeats the attack. Again, he misses by a fraction of an inch. He notices that he is sweating, but the heat in the room is intense. The mosquito is still on the ceiling, but over in a corner, and Kevin has to move several stacked cardboard boxes in order to get the chair positioned correctly. It is difficult to do this and still watch the mosquito, but he does not dare lose it. He wipes sweat off his forehead and climbs up on the chair. Before he can even aim, the mosquito lifts off and skims over to the wall above the window.

Kevin stares at the mosquito. It knows. It is playing a little game with him, playing with him as a cat plays with a cornered mouse. Shit! It couldn't know anything; it is only an insect, and insects operate on instinct.

He gets down from the chair. He feels itchy, and he sees that his hands are shaking. He is getting quite angry. This whole situation is ridiculous. He must be working too hard; it is not possible that an insect could cause him this much irritation. It is like—he spits the word out in disgust—a phobia! He does not believe in phobias, those little games people play with themselves. Totally unnecessary if one makes the effort to be in control of one's head.

He gazes at the mosquito and calms himself by deciding that the problem is still as simple as it was before. I must kill him, he thinks. I have him cornered in this room, and I simply have to persevere until I can smash him.

He moves toward the window, and the mosquito, as if aware of Kevin's determination, of its own danger, begins a lazy dance in the air. It arcs gracefully from wall to wall and back again, to the bookcase, then skimming up across the ceiling. It drops to the desktop and hesitates. Kevin leaps forward, but it lifts at once to ceiling height and continues the long sweeping flights back and forth around the room. Then it spirals down and across the floor in erratic jumps, never quite touching. Back up the wall, swiftly, and almost loses itself in sailcloth curtain folds.

Mesmerized, Kevin strains to keep it in sight, his body revolving like a maypole for the dance. His breathing is shallow, the sweat trickles through his beard. The mosquito releases the curtain and drifts to a stop at chest height on the pale wall. Kevin sucks in his stomach and sidles forward. He must not frighten the thing. Nervous gurgle of laughter in his throat. Frighten, indeed! The mosquito is not frightened; it knows who is in control. Slowly, slowly, he raises his arm, the essay papers crumpled and slippery with sweat. Another step, and another, at last he leans forward and smashes the papers against the wall.

He exhales noisily and searches the wall for the corpse. There is nothing there. Terrified, he swings around, scanning the room wildly. Then he thinks to look at the papers in his hand. A smear of blood and black leg fragments streak the white paper.

He closes his eyes for a second, and his breathing calms. The muscles relax so completely

that when he goes to the desk he trips over the rug and almost falls. Sinking into the chair, he wipes away the blood with a tissue and smooths the essays back on the pile. Leaning back, he rubs his face, pushes his hair back, tugs his thoughts into shape.

He must analyze what has happened here. He is still amazed at his own reactions, his own emotions. But he considers the small boy he was once, considers that small boy's ignorance of the order that can be imposed upon life if one knows how to go about it. Because of that ignorance he had suffered psychologically as well as physically. But psychological damage does not necessarily need to be permanent. Attitudes can be altered, emotions redirected, if one understands the problem.

He knows now that he understands the problem. Unresolved fears from childhood, which he must deal with and eliminate. Really, it all goes back to the fact that he is excessively sensitive to mosquito bites. He has already determined how to deal with the physical problem: the screens, sprays, lotions. And if he should happen to be bitten, there are preparations to reduce the irritation and itching. And naturally, one must remain calm.

He opens his eyes wide, startled. Now why did I say that, he wonders? Why would I say, 'remain calm'? That goes without saying. There is never an adequate reason for doing otherwise. He shrugs. Just confirmation of the fact that he needs to resolve old fears and get rid of them once and for all. Resolve. Resolution. He drifts around the word, savoring it, tasting its tidiness, the implied order.

But he feels that just the recognition of the old fear has had a strong effect in eliminating it. And he has killed the mosquito. He has proved himself to be in control. He smiles at the symbolism—killing the mosquito has killed the emotion—but he rather likes it. It makes sense.

He pulls the chair up to the desk and begins to work. The room is getting hotter, and he wishes he could open the window, but he does not want to risk any more visitations. He concentrates on the words sprawled across the page and is wading through the third paragraph when he feels a sort of pinprick on his left forearm. He glances down. Maybe that damn mosquito has bitten him after all. He gasps. The damn thing is there—on his arm—sucking his blood! Kevin stares in horror. Has it come back for revenge? In a panic he brings his right hand down on the insect with all his strength. This knocks his elbow on to the hard arm of the chair, bringing tears to his eyes. He moans, holding his elbow. The pain recedes, leaving a throbbing ache; he straightens up. He checks his forearm for blood and body. There are none. He starts up from the chair, frantic in blind pursuit of the enemy.

It betrays itself by its high thin singing. It is floating, swinging its blood-bloated body back and forth across the ceiling, triumphant. Kevin grabs the essays, scrapes the chair across the floor, jumps up and swings at the mosquito. It floats off to the other end of the room and Kevin follows, sucking air, gritting teeth, infuriated.

He drags the chair once or twice around the room and misses the mosquito a dozen times. Sweat pours off him; he has knocked his pipe and some books off the desk. His hair falls over his eyes, over his red face; he stands still finally and glares at the insect. There is nothing he can do except keep trying. He has to kill it—now!—with whatever he can. His arm is itching already, and he feels as if he has bites all over his body. The brute drifts gaily down from the ceiling and lights on his desk. He rushes, stumbles over the rug, putting his aim off by at least a foot. By the time he can strike again, the mosquito is back up on the ceiling. He screams at it, come down you fucker, come down and fight fair. He closes his aching eyes for a second. When he opens them again, the mosquito has vanished.

He turns around and around, his gaze darting over the room. It is gone. Gone. He feels his

throat constrict. He'll never be safe now. He has to find his tormentor. His narrowed eyes search every corner of the room. Nothing. Not even the breath of a movement. Where is it? He knows it is there. He knows it is hiding, getting ready to do another dance, to lead him around the room taunting him, driving him mad. Lying in wait. It will sing soon, just long enough to tantalize him, to tease him into following. Then silence. I have to wait for it, he thinks. I have to keep turning, watching, so it doesn't get behind me. It will catch me from behind if it can. Maybe it has friends out there. There must be some places they can come in, somewhere I don't know about. Maybe they're coming in one by one, lining up for their turn at the game. I have to find where. If it's only one—I can handle one. But not all of them.

He rips through the cardboard boxes, finds some sheets. Flings one up over the window and staples it to the wall. Hundreds of staples, all across the top, down the sides, along the bottom. Once he runs out of staples, and curses, throwing things out of his desk until he finds a box of them. Soon there is no place left for anything to get in from around the window.

Then he patrols. Systematically, logically, he rakes each wall with a steely gaze, turns to the next and so on, around and around the room, searching the ceiling in-between. He clutches his wad of essays and scratches at the bite. His body itches everywhere, and sweats; his clothes stick to him. He bumps into the furniture, stumbles against the bookcase, the boxes, but he keeps moving. He knows he must keep moving, keep moving; if you stop it will sneak up and attack you, it will come at you from behind.

The bite hurts, a sharp little pain. He knows they suck blood; he wonders if they inject venom, too. The idea makes him shudder. But he cannot stop thinking about it. He thinks of being injected with mosquito venom; maybe it will change him. Maybe it will turn him into a monster or a vegetable. He thinks of the delicate diaphanous wings of the mosquito, the hair-like legs; he imagines he has a stinger, he wonders what it would be like to suck blood, to fly, he envies the lazy graceful dances. He stands still then, imagines the heat waves lifting him.

The door opens. Elaine is there, her eyes round and questioning.

"Kevin...what...what was all that banging I heard?"

He hangs in the middle of the air, uncertain. He stares at her. He can see the blood pulsing in her throat.

"Kevin! Please stop waving those papers around and tell me what's wrong." She looks worried, apprehensive.

The floor is solid under his feet again. He is standing in his study. His wife is standing in the doorway.

A mosquito flies from somewhere behind him and lands on his desk. Deliberately, he leans over and kills it with one swat of the rolled-up essays. He controls his breathing. What does Elaine see?

"What have you done to the window? Is that the banging I heard?" Her dark eyes are puzzled.

"I put up that sheet," he says, composing his words with care, one at a time, "I put up that sheet to keep the mosquitoes out. I am terribly sensitive to their bites, you know. Terribly sensitive."

She looks past him at the window covered in white sheet, and then at him again.

"I'll go and get you a drink, dear," she says brightly, "you really look as if you could stand a break from all that marking." She turns and goes down the stairs.

"The poor darling," she says to the cat, "the poor darling has been working far too hard. It's a good thing the school year is almost over." She finds the gin, the vermouth, scrabbles ice-cubes

out of the tray.

Upstairs Kevin sits at his desk, back rigid, clutching a rolled-up essay to his chest. He stares unseeing at the wall and repeats, "I'm fine now. I'm fine now."

LAUNDRY

I've been to the shrink
and been shrunk
to the correct proportions
for my age and sex,
to the lowest
common denominator.

No threads hang loose.
No ugly stains on my soul.
But whenever there's a crisis
I have to phone and ask
how I'm supposed to react.

Throw me back in the mud.
Let wind and wave,
sun and the grit of time,
whip me back
into my own shape.

DAVID'S WEDDING

Half awake, I fantasize fatal accidents, smashing the van, blowing a tire. There's a later ferry but that's only postponing the moment. The fear puzzles me; I've always liked driving. This trip isn't essential, but a promise is a promise and anyway, I want to see the valley again.

Fear comes back as the tires hum over the wet road so smoothly I'm sure I've lost control. A skid? Is the steering gone? A gust of wind shakes the van, a reminder of how vulnerable this tin box is, how vulnerable flesh and bone, too. Then into a curve and the van answers the turn of the wheel, reliable as ever. I stop frightening myself and concentrate on the road.

Early morning, half mist, half rain. The cedars and firs are dull green, the seagulls mournful. Dreaming weather. The vibrations of the ferry make me even dreamier, but hundreds of people mill about, talking, rustling, purposeful. Maybe I'm in a movie. But what's the plot?

Over by the news-stand a tall man in corduroys, cotton checked shirt, and a black Stetson gazes out at the sea. His red hair and beard are trim, his profile serene. He could be the hero, strong, loving, gentle. My hero? I look down at my jeans, too loose now, and my grubby sneakers and decide I'm not dressed like a heroine.

The road on the other side is dry but all curves. As the sun burns away the last of the mist, cramped muscles irritate me into full awareness of reality and the dreaming is over. My head is thinking again, out of my control.

It's good not to be chained to a nine-to-five job any more, yet the freedom unsettles me. Things were more comfortable, I felt more secure, when there were no decisions to make, just get up, go to work, come home, make supper. By then I was too tired to worry about other choices. I don't want to go back to that kind of life but it's annoying to find out freedom has a downside. I have other new freedoms, too, but my mind veers away from those.

In the next town, I park behind the Dairy Queen and eat my corned beef and tomato sandwich. I'll buy coffee later to justify the space I'm taking. That thought annoys me, too. Why do I have to justify anything?

Across the alley, on the back steps of an old house, sits a man clad only in Bermuda shorts, forking food into his mouth with gusto. His body is heavy and bronzed, his grey hair shines around his face. He's like an animal, easy and natural in the sun, enjoying his food but alert to the sound and movement around him. We should all be like that, I think.

What am I looking for in the valley? Answers, I guess. I grew up there; it's where I come from. Maybe it will tell me where to go next.

There are a lot of questions. Should I quit working altogether and take a chance on the novel? Will no security at all make me too anxious? What will I do if the money runs out? Should I let myself fall in love again? Do I have any choice? I wish I didn't need money, or love either.

I drive, thinking how beautiful the country is. Mountains, clear sky, green trees, lakes, a flash of birch, a flight of swallows. By supper time I'm tired, stiff, bitchy, and feeling a little down. I decide to hell with the camp stove and stop for a hamburger. I can do breakfast out in the open tomorrow.

At the government campground, among the pines, I feel better. I can sit at the picnic table and smoke and let my muscles ease. All around there are tents and campers, little fires, radio noises, children playing. I like this. Far enough away from everybody for privacy, near enough for comfort.

I'm glad now that I stopped here, took the plunge. Motels are so easy and driving a fast highway doesn't help...an opportunity goes by so quickly it might as well not be there. I've never camped alone, never handled a camp stove. I'm just too tired, that's all. Everything is easier when you feel good.

North of Prince George I pick up a hitchhiker, another 'first' for me. Wayne is a Yukon native from somewhere around Whitehorse and tells me in his slow, lilting voice that he's been visiting relatives in the States and can't wait to get home where people are friendly. His puppy pees on the floor and he mops it up without comment. When it's time to refuel he fills the tank at a self-serve bar, pleased with himself. A 'first' for him.

Out of Chetwynd, the driver of another VW van flags us down. The jump start doesn't work, and I agree to drop him off in Dawson Creek. This man is European, German maybe, and he keeps looking at Wayne and then at me. Obvious that he's wondering what the connection is, why we're traveling together.

I let Wayne and his puppy off at the bus station in Fort St. John. I'm exhausted. The rain's been steady ever since Prince George, the road nothing but construction, gravel, line-ups, trucks, screaming equipment. Nothing to see but dark overcast, dark gloomy trees. And I was nervous, picking up Wayne and stopping for that other man. But I'm kind of pleased with myself, too.

The valley has changed. The bare hills are now covered with young poplar, the road is wide and gravel instead of dirt and, across the creek from the farm, are two oil wells, the black grasshopper pumps steadily moving up and down. The barn is gone, so is the outhouse. Now there's a big, shiny Quonset hut and two enormous tractors.

In the house, plumbing, carpets, electric lights, a propane furnace, and a refrigerator. I ask what happened to the airtight heater and the wood cook stove, but nobody remembers, now. The only place I find a whiff of the past is the cellar, though that's changed, too. The cellar steps are the same and the potato bin is still there, but no potatoes, just long white roots from the eyes of the old ones. Mold grows on the wooden support walls, cobwebs hang everywhere. The shelves are full of glass sealers, but the sealers are empty.

It feels like summer has gone and I never noticed. This is silly. It's only July. But there seems to be a wall, like plastic, between me and summer. I can see but I can't touch. Is it because I no longer spend dreamy afternoons lying on top of a straw stack, watching the clouds? I'm always doing, now, or thinking about doing. Is it because I live inside office walls, apartment walls, most of the time?

My brother takes me to see David's new trailer, set up across the road on the old oat field. Washer, dryer, stove, fridge, color TV, everything. Instant household. No litter, no pictures, no keepsakes. But perhaps those will come.

When I ask Joy about David's bride, she says, "She's real nice...a hard worker." I'd forgotten how important that is. I guess farm wives still have to work hard.

David is twitching and fussing and juggling a pen, reminding his father, my brother, about the liquor license every five minutes. I think he'll be glad when the wedding is over though he seems committed to all the ritual. His angelic face, pure, pale-skinned, is so serious that when he does smile, it is enchanting. I wonder what he looks like when he's angry, what life will do to his face.

I sense the same frustrations in my brother as there are in me. We're both too easy-going. He'd rather be someplace else, doing something else. Me, too. The frustration erupts in different ways, though. I drown mine in scotch. I don't know what he does with his. Sometimes he raises his eyebrows and shrugs at me.

We sat with David and Susan this afternoon while they opened and catalogued nearly a hundred wedding gifts. Joy says they're paying for the wedding themselves. Then she starts adding up the cost of the gifts. I think how much easier it would have been for them to skip the fuss and just elope, but I don't say so. The ritual is important and at least the economy gets two stirs instead of none.

Joy drives from the back seat till I'd like to smack her and I'm not even doing the driving. My brother ignores her; I suppose he's used to it. They don't ask me about my life. Cities and office jobs and divorces are foreign territory. Joy says, in all seriousness, "Maybe you'll meet one of your old boyfriends while you're here. Ron's wife died, you know." Does she think I'm looking to get into trouble again so soon?

We go to David's apartment in town to pick up the rented wedding suits. There are supposed to be four suits, but they can find only three. I tell them that I saw David bring in four bags the day before, but nobody ever seems to listen to anyone else. They keep right on speculating about it, so I light a cigarette, let it go. At least I'm learning to tell which problems are mine and which aren't.

David is twenty-five, his brother thirty. Joy still does their laundry and mending and fusses over them all the time. I admire their closeness, but the boys are in for a disappointment if they think their wives are going to treat them as well as their mother does.

Joy says getting married isn't so easy when you're older—you're independent and can do everything for yourself, so you don't need anyone. I like being independent, but I am looking for something. The trouble is I'm not sure what.

During the ceremony the minister says the wife shall be under the husband's dominion as the church is under God's and that it wasn't good for man to be alone, so God made him a helpmeet. Germaine Greer would have a problem with that. So do I. It's not my only problem but I don't want to think about more than one at a time.

While the photographs are being taken, we go to Joy's sister's place for a drink. Ruth pours healthy drinks and I'm ready for mine. I wish it was scotch, not rye, but I'm not going to complain. Ruth's front room is full of plastic ferns and plants and butterflies and flies, crocheted doilies, cushions, china ornaments, little rugs, photographs. Pink flamingos on the lawn. No sign of a book anywhere. Ruth doesn't know what to say to me. I don't have a husband or kids or a house, I don't put in a garden, all I do is work in an office. I've never told any of them that I write books.

The reception is in the community hall and there's no water or plumbing, just the usual outdoor biffy. A huge bowl of punch, porch-climber. Lots of little kids running around among the adults. Susan dances the first dance with David, just the two of them on the floor, and people rush out to pin money to her gown. I watch and think cynical thoughts about marriage, about rituals. Then I see the love, the companionship implicit in the way they look at each other, talk together. Maybe, after all, there's something to it.

A three-man band plays country and western. I'm dancing with Rick, the best man up from Calgary, and he asks them to play some Simon and Garfunkel. The guitar player says, "Who?" I try to do an old-fashioned waltz with Rick and fall all over his feet.

Joy has a couple of drinks and wants to know if I'm going to get married again. I can tell she doesn't believe me when I say that I don't want to but my brother shrugs and says, "Long as you're doing what you want to." He drinks too much porch-climber and spends the last three hours asleep in the truck. He's not happy with himself.

Life is back to normal. My brother has gone swathing, no doubt hoping the fresh air will

cure his hangover. David drops in for coffee, along with a couple of the neighbors. Crops, critters, politics. It's like being a child again, sitting by the same kitchen window, listening to the men talk, listening to Joy talk gardens and cooking like my mother did.

This is such a beautiful country. Nowhere else have I seen the wide skies and wonderful cumulus cloud formations. There was dew sparkling on the grass this morning, poplars rustling in a slight breeze. I think about staying. I'd like the sunshine, the smell of stored grain, growing plants. I could help with the harvest, drive machinery, and come in at supper time to eat all this gorgeous food. Maybe I'm not as much of an outlander as I thought.

No, it wouldn't work.

I've always been 'different.' More so now. I don't want to try explaining, I don't think I can. Joy wouldn't let me hole up with my typewriter and be anti-social, she'd try to get me married off, 'settled.' I can just see myself on some farm, hoeing peas and beans, peeling all those spuds, roasting all that meat, cooking up for the menfolk.

There's nothing wrong with that—for somebody else. It would be nice to be with family, to belong somewhere. They're good people. But who would I talk to about writing? And I wouldn't be able to keep my opinions to myself forever.

I left yesterday. I'm sitting in this dumb motel, going home, feeling good about it. Feeling revved up about writing, disgusted with myself for not camping tonight. Glad I don't have to go to work in the morning. I got one or two answers, I guess. The valley isn't the same as when I left all those years ago. And I can't go back.

I remember when I was about ten, standing on the Peace River bridge with my brother and looking down and feeling dizzy. He grabbed me because I was leaning way out, steadied me down. Maybe he just did it again.

AUGUST

Old Caesar gave his name to
fields of tomatoes
the color of fresh blood,
pumpkins turning gold,
wheat heavy on the stalk,
jars and jars of pickles,
fall fairs, rodeo dust.

Hail, Augustus!
Summer dies in your name.

THE HAPPIEST DAY

Jennie steered the salmon troller, Elvira III, around Jamieson Point and straight for the village wharf a mile up the inlet. The bow sliced through silky water, trailing a vee of swells that glittered under the June sun. She loved being on the water, loved being at the wheel of a boat, especially this boat, which had been hers for six glorious months. Life was wonderful. If Brad would only ask her to marry him, it would be perfect.

Jennie Tolliver holds the boat on course, fighting mountainous waves and gale force winds. She glances away from the rain-lashed windshield to check on Brad, lying helpless on the bridge deck, moaning and weak from loss of blood. But nothing can stop Jennie from bringing Brad and the boat safely home. A few feet from the wharf she drops the bumpers over the side and heaves a line to the grizzled, worried fishermen waiting there. "And she's barely eighteen, by Gawd," one of them says. "Couldn't a done better myself."

Jennie shook her head, the braid of long black hair bouncing on her back. The story wasn't quite right—it should be Brad handling the boat, then carrying her ashore in his arms, heedless of the blood staining his clothes. That would be much more romantic, the way it was in books. She turned to watch him on the afterdeck where he was gutting salmon, a flurry of gulls squawking overhead and swooping down for the entrails.

That special thrill went up her spine as she relived again the moment they'd met. He'd come striding up the wharf ramp and into the general store where she was working over Christmas vacation. He'd looked her up and down, blue eyes missing nothing, pushed his yellow baseball cap back to reveal curly brown hair, and smiled. His smile still made her feel as though she were a little drunk.

Brad had fallen in love with her at that exact same moment. He said so whenever she asked him.

Jennie throttled the engine down as the inlet narrowed toward the dock and the Elvira splintered the glassy water's reflection of steep cedar-clad mountains. It was incredible the way fate had brought her and Brad together. He was from Vancouver, far to the south; she'd never been anywhere except out to sea on her father's fish boat or on the Elvira III, the boat her uncle had left her when he died. Brad coming to her from that vast, complicated world she'd glimpsed now and then on the neighbor's snowy television screen must have been preordained. She'd learned from Angie's collection of old romance novels that every person had a soul mate somewhere in the world, but she hadn't expected to find hers so soon.

Brad knew how the world worked, what life was all about. She thought of the crude boys at school and Angie's tales of their juvenile fumbling. How could she ever have let that tall, pimply Jerry kiss her? But that was all in the past. Brad hadn't asked her to marry him yet, but he would. She dreamed each night of being his wife and working with him on the boat, hauling lines, gaffing and gutting fish. It was work she knew and liked. And she loved the life, loved being out on the water. They'd be all set up now that she had her own boat.

Handling a boat and fishing weren't everything, though. When she'd said that to Brad in the privacy of her bunk on the Elvira, he reached out and unbuttoned her shirt. "You can crew as good as any man, and you can cook. And you can do this. Nothing else is important. Not to me." Then he'd smiled that smile and she stopped worrying.

Jennie Tolliver, stunning in frothy white, walks down the aisle of the old log church. Brad Evans waits at the altar, a red carnation in the lapel of his dark suit and happiness in his eyes.

They say their vows and, arm in arm, come down the steps in a hail of rice and congratulations, into a crowd of noisy friends. Her mother is flushed and chattering, her father beaming. She sparkles through the wedding feast and the dance at the schoolhouse, twirling to the rhythm of fiddle, piano and accordion.

A little way up the mountain, she'd found a house they could buy. It was old and musty and littered with mouse droppings, but she could make it into a home. She'd plant a garden next spring, too. Potatoes and turnips, carrots, and flowers. If only Brad would ask the magic question, she'd show him the house and tell him her plans for it. It would be so good for him to have a real home. She'd almost cried when he told her he had no family. No parents, no brothers and sisters, nothing. He never mentioned friends; maybe he didn't have any.

It was unfair of her parents to dislike Brad just because he was a little older. Ten years was nothing. She dreaded the questions they asked about him and the looks they exchanged when she spoke of him. She wished she could find words to tell them how much she loved him, how right he was for her. But in the Tolliver household, like most of those she knew in the village, words were used only for everyday things like weather and fishing and food.

Her parents would give in, the same as they had when she'd asked for guitar lessons last year. After she realized that learning to play meant endless hours of practice, keeping her away from the ocean and going out with her father to fish, she sold the guitar and they'd let her keep the money. When she could make them understand that she and Brad truly loved each other and were fated to be together, they'd be happy for her.

Jennie cut the engine and the troller eased alongside the wharf. Brad jumped down and secured the bow line, steadyng the boat so she could get off and do the stern line. She was proud of their teamwork. It showed how wonderful their life together would be. She held out her arms to hug him.

He side-stepped her. "Not now, kitten. I gotta take care of the fish. I'll see you later. Maybe around nine."

Blood burned in her cheeks as her feet jerked her back a step. She'd just wanted to show how happy she was to be with him. Sometimes his moods were hard to read. Pretending indifference, she said, "See you." But he was already back on board, inside the wheelhouse. She walked up the wharf to the gravel road leading home, her face cooling, an ache behind her breastbone.

He'd go to the McKenzies' house now, where he boarded, and drink beer with the McKenzie boys. He fished with them most days. Sometimes it seemed as though he liked being with them better than being with her. Yet when she asked if he loved her, he always said, "I wouldn't be here if I didn't." Why couldn't he say the words without being asked? Maybe he wasn't quite sure of her feelings. But it wasn't that; she'd told him how much she loved him.

What about those girlfriends he'd had in Vancouver, like that blonde he mentioned one night? His casual words and the picture he'd shown her had pierced like a gaff ripping into bare flesh. Had the girl been cool and easy like him? Had she walked away disdainfully so that he'd want her all the more?

Jennie Tolliver, red lips curled in a sneer, pivots on her high heels and strolls away, leaving Brad Evans crumpling in lovesick despair. She snaps her fingers for a taxi and rides to her elegant penthouse apartment. Bored, she idly ruffles through her address book. Who will have the privilege of taking her to dinner tonight? Kevin, perhaps? She's in the mood for orchids, soft music, witty conversation. Yes, Kevin will do.

Jennie frowned, rejecting the fantasy. She couldn't do that to Brad. Could she? But why would she? Love was the most important thing.

At home, her father said, "How much are you paying Brad to crew for you?"
"Half the catch."

"Is he paying half the boat expenses then?" he asked, scowling, knowing the answer as well as she did.

"No."

Her mother, always more vocal, took over. "That's not fair and you know it. He's taking advantage of you. It's a hard enough life fishing without giving away the profits."

"But..."

"But nothing!" Her mother was angry. "If you fish for a living, you have to learn the right way to do it. Though it won't break my heart one bit if you go broke and lose that boat; I want a better life for you. Anyway, you should be at home studying. You've got final exams in three weeks. How are you going to make something of yourself if you don't get an education?"

Jennie opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. It was plain they weren't ready to listen.

Her mother sighed. "I want a chicken for tomorrow night's dinner. You go kill that big, old hen with the bent comb for me, Jennie."

She caught the slow-moving hen by the legs and laid her, squawking and struggling, on the chopping block. The bird's raucous protests reminded her of all the ugly things her parents had said about Brad. She swung the axe hard. It sliced through the hen's neck the way she imagined her words slicing through her parents' objections. But words, even if she could think of the right ones, might not be enough. She might have to prove to them that she and Brad were fated to be together.

She sat through the silent meal, head bowed over her plate, clothed in silent, rebellious fury, swallowing her tears along with her sausages. Afterwards, she sat outside with her schoolbooks, her back against the warm, weathered boards of the house. Buttercups and Scotch broom glowed on the hill below and led her gaze to the harbor. The creak and tinkle of rigging on the trollers vied with the strident arguments of feeding gulls. Her mind drifted to dreams of all the things she might do in the future. The books lay beside her, unopened.

Jennie Tolliver Evans smiles sedately and bows again as the applause reverberates in the huge auditorium. She's experienced it so often in recent years, and she knows what the reporters will ask when they interview her later. "Mrs. Evans, how did you get where you are today without even finishing your high school education? Were you aware then that you had such special talent?"

What would it be? Singing? Acting, maybe. Or running a big corporation. She could decide later.

That night, snuggled beside Brad in the bunk on the Elvira III, she was happy again. Thank God she finally had the pills. It hadn't been easy getting them without her mother finding out, but Brad kept saying how much better it was for him if she was the one to take precautions. She hadn't yet had a climax herself so she must be doing something wrong. It was sure to be all right after they were married, though. Meanwhile she responded to his love-making in the way he seemed to expect.

Tonight, he'd wanted to do it twice. Then he was quiet for a long time, as his breathing slowed to normal, and she didn't know what to say. He seemed so far away; she wanted him to talk, to be close to her the way he was when his body covered hers.

Then he said, "I'm leaving. Going back south."

She stopped breathing.

"You can come with me if you want."

"Oh, Brad, yes!" The words burst out like quail breaking cover, seeking freedom, open sky.

"Okay, then." He reached for her and there was silence again except for water lapping against the hull, then his smothered moan.

"How soon should we have the wedding? We can get the church almost any time." Her mother would make her a white dress; Angie and Carol would be bridesmaids. Maybe Ruth and Susan, too. What kind of flowers did she want to carry? Almost the whole village would come, so they'd need lots of food and somebody to decorate the schoolhouse for the dance. Would he buy her a diamond ring? Carol already had one and she wasn't even eighteen yet. Her stomach clenched with excitement as she planned how she'd tell her friends the news.

He looked surprised, then shook his head. "I wasn't thinking wedding, kitten. There's no time, anyhow, I gotta leave tomorrow or the next day. I got a job crewing on a seiner, out of Vancouver. I'll make a lot more money than I do trolling."

"Tomorrow? But that's so soon!"

"They're heading out in four days, and I got things to do first." He climbed out of the bunk and pulled his pants on. "What are you looking so sad about? If I can make more money this way, I might buy my own boat."

"What about the Elvira?"

He shook his head. "The Elvira is a pile of junk."

Jennie Tolliver clings, exhausted, to a section of the hull, her white wedding dress floating in the wreckage of the Elvira III. The houses crumble in the deserted village and silent gulls perch on the warped and rotting wharf.

Jennie looked at Brad. It will be all right, she told herself. It's bound to be all right...because I love him. And he loves me, or he wouldn't have asked me to go with him. I don't want to leave the village, but I'll go anywhere, do anything, to be with him. That's what love is about. We'll work it out.

"Mom and Dad won't like it," she said. "Can't we get married by a Justice of the Peace? And have just a little party after?"

"I told you; I haven't got time. And I don't want any parties, not with your folks glaring at me and all the local yokels making dumb remarks." He moved away, lit a cigarette. "Anyway, what do you want all the fuss of a wedding for? It doesn't mean a damn thing."

Her throat tight, she couldn't find the words to tell him how much a wedding would mean to her. Especially when he seemed to have such contempt for it. And for her friends.

He finished his cigarette in silence, not looking at her. Finally, he said, "Okay, tell you what I'll do. On the way down, I'll stop in Port Drury and arrange for us to be married in front of a JP later on."

"Later? When?"

"I don't know, kitten. I'll be out on the seiner for a month or so. If the trip works out, I'll take a week off and come back for you."

It was all so vague, so offhand. But perhaps he felt uncomfortable talking about something as serious and important as marriage. And, after all, he'd be back in a month and they'd be husband and wife, with a wonderful, happy new life before them. She imagined him admitting to her how good it was to be back in the village, that the Elvira III suited him fine. She burrowed into his shoulder. "All right, Brad. I'll be waiting."

The days crept by. Jennie was scarcely aware of what was going on around her. School ended and she went through the graduation ceremony, uncaring, unfeeling. The next day she told

her parents, "I'm going to marry Brad. We might live in Vancouver for a while."

"Jennie, no!" Her mother stood, hands on hips, face red. "I've told you and told you he's selfish. Why won't you listen?"

"Please don't do this," her father said. "Brad's no good, Jennie. He's just using you."

"You don't know what you're talking about! Anyway, you can't stop me. I'm eighteen. And I love him."

Her mother turned her back, her head bowed, shoulders shaking. In a moment she swung around, eyes red, a damp tissue balled in her hand, and said, "I hoped you'd get an education, be something, before you got married."

"I'll miss you," her father said. His voice trembled. Then Jennie cried, too.

But she knew it would work out. Brad loved her; she'd talk him into staying in the village and fishing with the Elvira III like they had before. The boat wasn't junk; it might be old, but it was reliable. And it was hers. They didn't need a bigger boat, anyway. They'd be able to have the wedding the way she'd planned and the dance at the schoolhouse, too. She went up the mountain to look at the old house again and sat in the weed-choked garden, listening to birds chatter and imagining the happy days ahead when she had Brad all to herself.

She often found her father staring at her vacantly, his pipe gone out. Her mother started in again about Brad being too old for her, too self-centered; she'd never be happy with him. Jennie retreated into deeper silence and wondered how she could endure the comments until Brad came for her. Didn't they know what it meant to be in love? Didn't they want her to be happy?

Jennie Tolliver sits beside the double grave where her parents have just been laid to their final rest. There is sadness but a sense of freedom, too. Perhaps it was better this way; they'd never accepted Brad nor he them. They'd refused to believe her life was perfect, refused to be at peace with her. She wishes she had a twin who could have made them happy. It seems unfair that they should die so young, killed in an accident. And yet...

July came, but not Brad. Jennie worked with her father on his boat and sometimes on the Elvira III. In his spare time, he taught her more about maintaining the engine and equipment and she absorbed the information like moss soaking up winter rain. If she kept the Elvira in top shape, Brad wouldn't be able to call it a hunk of junk. Other days she spent hours on the dock staring down the inlet. Nothing felt real except the emptiness. She was suspended in time, waiting for Brad to bring her alive. The days went by with no letter, no phone call, and the ache of loneliness gave way to a fear that he might never come back.

But he'd said he loved her.

One morning her father slipped on the rain-slick dock and broke his leg. For a moment, as she ran for help, Jennie felt guilty. But she knew his fall had been an accident, not the result of her fantasies. After he'd been home for a few days, cursing himself for his carelessness and bemoaning the lost working hours, she forgot she'd imagined him dead.

Late one sunny afternoon, after Brad had been gone six weeks, the supply boat came around Jamieson Point and up the inlet to the dock. When Brad got off, the rush of elation and relief unsteadied her legs, made her tongue useless. As they walked up the wharf, Brad gave her a pat on the bum and smiled down at her. She clung to him and whispered, "I thought you weren't coming back. I thought maybe you found somebody else."

He shook his head. "Nobody like you. The other girls I know are too damned independent and opinionated. You're sweet and loving, kitten, just the way I like."

Ardent, blood and breath in turmoil, she held his callused hand as they walked toward her parents' house. "Why don't we stay here, Brad? The Elvira's really a good boat. And there's this

house I know about that..."

He stopped and faced her. "You're not gonna start giving me a hard time, are you? There's no way I'm living out here in the boonies. Vancouver's a swinging place. You'll get used to working a bigger boat."

She bit back the protests. Maybe it was selfish to want something he didn't want. She loved him more than anything in the world, didn't she? And he was going to marry her, wasn't he? As long as they were together, she'd be happy anywhere. That was the way love worked. "I was only kidding, Brad."

"Good." He smiled that smile of his and everything was wonderful again. Except that he hadn't said anything about the diamond ring. Had he forgotten to bring it? She wouldn't ask; he might get angry again. And he loved her, she reminded herself; he might be saving the ring as a surprise when they were alone.

Halfway up the hill, she stopped to look back at the dock. The supply boat was backing out, ready to continue its journey south down the coast. It would be a week before it made that trip again; plenty of time to try and convince Brad to stay in the village. Maybe looking at the old house and seeing that he could have a real home might do it.

"What shall we do until next week, when the supply boat comes back?" she said.

"We're not waiting for that," Brad said. "If I don't show up for the seiner's next run, three days from now, they'll leave without me." He glanced down at her and smiled that heart-stopping smile. "I figure we should leave tomorrow morning, in the Elvira. That okay with you?"

"It's fine, Brad." But she could feel the blood throbbing in her temples, the muscles in her stomach tying themselves in knots. Now there was no time to show him the house, to change his mind about leaving.

But they could always come back. Her mind moved on. What would they do with the Elvira in Vancouver? Wharfage would probably cost a lot down there. She looked at Brad's confident expression and decided not to worry. He knew what he was doing.

She beamed through supper and packing and even the goodbyes on the wharf next morning saddened her for only a moment. She still felt as if she were in a dream world, but it was a happy, sunlit dream now, not the dark nightmare of Brad's absence. In a few hours, they'd be married, and the sun would shine forever.

Her parents weren't coming to Port Drury; her mother had never learned to run a boat and her father couldn't, not with his slowly mending leg. She was sorry they wouldn't be there to see her get married, but relieved not to have to face their disapproval any longer.

By the time they rounded Jamieson Point to head south, bad weather was rolling in from the Pacific. Fog blotted out August and surrounded the Elvira with wintry gray. Jennie wasn't afraid; Brad knew the coast and so did she. She felt intensely alive in the misty world that held nothing but her and Brad and the Elvira and an occasional gull soaring above the foam-flecked waves. She wished they could stay like this forever.

She looked at Brad, wanting to say something loving or clever or interesting, but she couldn't think of the right words. He seemed to be lost in his own thoughts anyway. She wished he would say something, even about the weather, so she could answer, so they could talk to each other.

She wondered if they'd sleep on the boat that night or would he want to go to a hotel, even though they weren't married yet? She'd feel more comfortable on the boat where there were no strangers to stare at them. When she thought about the next day's ceremony, fear and excitement fluttered like moths inside her.

She handed Brad the cigarette he'd asked for and watched the end of it glow red, then go gray, as the moths climbed into her throat. She went outside and vomited over the side.

On the way to the JP's office next morning, they passed Port Drury's one hotel, a faded, sagging three story frame building. She hoped Brad had reserved the best room for their honeymoon night. Would he order wine with dinner? Champagne, even? Would he carry her across the threshold?

When they came out of the JP's office the fog had begun to lift. Jennie still felt as if she were in a dream, hardly hearing the words of congratulation from the JP and the two strangers who'd witnessed their marriage. She'd never worn a hat before and she kept reaching up to touch it, to make sure it was still there, wondering if it looked silly. She'd wanted to have some pictures taken but Brad had forgotten his camera and he said there was no time to go to a commercial photographer.

While they waited for the taxi, she twisted the wedding ring round and round on her finger. She'd thought it would be gold, like other people wore, but it wasn't. Brad said it was silver.

When the taxi came, she expected Brad to say, "Drury Hotel." Instead, he said, "Government wharf." What was wrong? Why did he want to go to the boat? She cuddled close to him, the way new wives did, but he was talking to the driver about the weather forecast and she moved away. All the way down to the dock they talked about the weather. On the Elvira, she clung to him. He gave her a little hug and said, "Get your jeans back on, kitten, you can't crew in that outfit."

He meant to keep traveling. On their wedding day. There wasn't going to be a honeymoon. Not even one night. There wasn't going to be a celebration. Not even for just the two of them.

Nothing had changed. It was as if the wedding hadn't happened.

But that wasn't true. They were married; she was his wife. For all the rest of her days. In the wheelhouse she watched Brad's expressionless face as he started the engine and studied the chart. How could he act like this on their wedding day, the most special day of their lives? Where was the joy and excitement, the laughter and good talk about their love, their plans, what they'd name their kids?

It had begun to rain, light, steady drops sliding down the windshield. She shivered in the damp and pressed her hand against the burning under her ribs. We just got married, she said to herself again, seeking some explanation, some assurance. We're going to be together for the rest of our lives. I've got to say something. Maybe he's just waiting for me to get the conversation started. Maybe he doesn't know how.

She cleared her throat and said, "Brad, honey, are you really happy now?" His head turned toward her, blue eyes not quite focused.

"What?" he said.

She knew she couldn't get the words out again. "Nothing. It's all right, I didn't say anything."

He rolled up the chart and stuck it in the rack behind him. "We should make Granite Bay by dark. We'll anchor there and be into Vancouver first thing tomorrow."

She nodded.

"Gotta make an early start in the morning; get my stuff back on board the seiner by noon. The skipper wants to head out right after lunch." He lit a cigarette and switched on the radio, fiddling with the dials until he got a news broadcast. Afterward, he said, "When I get back from the trip, we'll sell this hunk of junk. Should get enough for a down payment on a decent boat."

She stared at him, sure she hadn't heard him right. "Sell the Elvira?"

"Don't be stupid, kitten. I'm not going to waste time and money on this tub."

Stunned, she turned her head away and stared out the side window, the one that never quite

closed. The raw, wet wind seeped in through her pores and formed ice crystals in her blood.

I'm married now, she thought, just like I wanted. I'm Mrs. Brad Evans. This is supposed to be the happiest day of my life.

Brad turned to her. "I'm not sure I closed the hatch tight. Go check it."

She slipped down from the seat and went out on deck. Port Drury and the harbor were fading into the thickening rain. They looked gray and dingy. Even the Elvira III looked dingy and tattered now. Like the wedding dress that existed only in her imagination, the wedding dress she'd never have. The ring. The party. The house on the mountain. The honeymoon night. All the things she wanted, all the things she loved, except for Brad, were gone, sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Drowned, along with all her foolish fantasies.

He didn't love her. He'd never loved her. Her face flamed hot under the damp, tender caress of the fog, her fists opening and closing as she clenched her arms tight to her sides.

Jennie Tolliver Evans guts fish on the afterdeck of the salmon troller Invader. Brad is at the wheel; he won't allow her to touch the controls. She's overheard him tell another fisherman that marriage isn't so bad; he'd got a free deckhand out of it. After the catch is unloaded, they go to the dark three-room apartment across from the fishermen's bar. Jennie makes supper but Brad says, "Keep it warm. I'm gonna have a cool one with the guys." Later, much later, he flops into bed and onto her, his silence heavier than his body. Finished, he turns his back and begins to snore. Jennie Tolliver Evans gets out of bed, looks in the mirror and wonders who she is.

The hatch was secure but two bumpers on the forward port side were hanging outboard and thumping against the hull. She started toward them, then stopped.

She went inside and told him about the bumpers.

He frowned. "You could have done that. Okay, I'll fix them. Take the wheel and keep her steady."

She eased behind the wheel and watched Brad move carefully along the narrow ledge between the cabin window and the hull. He bent over, reaching for the first bumper.

Jennie Tolliver pulls the throttle full open and swings the Elvira hard to starboard. As the boat heels sharply, she catches a glimpse of Brad Evans pitching headfirst over the side. Perhaps she will circle around and rescue him, save him from certain death, brush off his admiration, his gratitude, his vow to dedicate his life to her happiness.

And perhaps she won't.

Jennie eased the throttle down and made two quarter mile circles around the site where Brad had fallen overboard. His yellow baseball cap floated on the gray waves. But Brad was gone.

She looked at the empty afterdeck and the empty seat beside her. She wasn't afraid. She could read a chart as well as Brad, as well as anybody. The Elvira had radar and radio. If she ran into trouble she could radio for help. Like she should do now, give her location, say there was a man overboard.

But she wouldn't. No one would miss him. No one would look for him. People would just think he had drifted somewhere else.

She wiped the tears off her cheeks and brought the boat around until the compass pointed north. Then she set the wheel to amidships and clamped it in position, took the chart from the rack and began to plot a course for Jamieson Point.

GIFTS

I wrote love poems.
You turned your eyes away.

I danced, moonlit.
You turned off the music.

I vowed devotion.
You turned sullen.

Our bodies joined,
tangled in unforgiving knots,
destroying the last
of the bright packages.

I must inform you
that these gifts are not
returnable,
that your fears are not
refundable.

SKY DREAMS

Kathryn closed the door of the weathered farmhouse and moved into the glare of the hot August afternoon. Her throat ached and the welling tears under her eyelids threatened to spill over. But there were chores waiting. Bring wood in, gather eggs, weed the garden. Bring the check book up to date.

Let Gary do the damn check book—dollars and cents meant everything to him. Why couldn't he see that living on the land was more important than having money?

The distant purr of the tractor hummed counterpoint to chirring of grasshoppers in the dry grass. A haze of dust above black furrows marked Gary's progress along the field across the creek. He seemed far away, a toy man on a toy tractor. Even when he was standing beside her, he was far away.

He'd badgered her again at noon. "You know we'll never make anything out of this old place. It's too small."

This old place. She'd been born on this old place. Grown up on it. Worked on it. Knew and loved every acre of it. "Becker next door wants to sell. That would give us double the acreage, all in one parcel."

He shook his head. "How do we buy it, Kathryn? We have no money. That's the whole problem."

She ladled out green pea soup; the peas came from their own garden, that she'd planted and weeded and picked. Carried buckets of water to when the rains didn't come. "We could get a mortgage."

Gary's mouth tightened. "How many times do I have to explain mortgage payments to you? Loan payments for new equipment? And no guarantee we wouldn't get frozen out or hailed out or dried out. Or that wheat prices would stay high. We could lose everything."

"Let's just keep what we've got. It's paid for." Her widowed father had made the final payment the year he died. "It grows almost everything we eat. And we don't pay rent."

"Yeah," he said, "that's fine, but I notice it doesn't grow spare parts. The grain truck's about to fall off its wheels, you know. We can't afford to hire somebody to truck wheat to the elevator and they're sure as hell not going to come and get it!" He'd gone, the door slamming behind him, before she could think of an answer.

Kathryn looked at her watch. One-thirty. Three hours before she had to start supper. Four hours before Gary came back and started in again about selling the farm and moving to a house in town. A house like every other house on the street. Concrete sidewalks, pavement, traffic, people.

She took her hand off the silvered gate post, which leaned in mute resignation toward the road, and looked at the garden. She didn't feel like weeding. Her gaze shifted to the shimmering green of the willows along the creek.

She walked down the slope and sat on the shaded grassy bank under a clump of willows, her sneakered feet almost touching the shallow water. When the snow melted in spring the creek flooded, tearing out willow roots and depositing muddy debris on the banks. She remembered the excitement the year it undermined the rough log bridge. It had taken her and her father two days to fix it so it would bear the weight of the truck and tractor again.

The creek twisted in long loops, bordered by thick, tangled willow and piles of rocks gathered from adjoining fields. It had been years since she'd wandered here, looking for fox dens

and weaving tales of fairy princesses.

Through the willows she could glimpse the granaries and the old straw stack at the corner of the field. As a child, she'd burrowed a nest in the top of the stack. Lying there under the hot sun, she'd made up fantasies about the clouds sailing on their magical blue sea. How long had it been since she'd played with sky dreams? Too long.

Gary didn't think much of daydreaming. She'd told him about sky dreams once and he'd said, "Kid stuff. Doesn't get the wheat planted or the fences fixed, does it?"

Splashing through the creek, Kathryn winced with pleasure as the cool water saturated her canvas sneakers. She climbed the bank, saw that the tractor was moving away from her and scrambled to the top of the straw stack.

Home safe! Smiling as the childish phrase popped into her mind, she rubbed her skin where it had been grazed by the brittle, musty straw. She lay on her back, wriggling into the straw bed to mold it to her body.

The sky was a deep, clear blue and in the southwest cumulus clouds massed in mounds like whipped cream, slowly shifting into new shapes. As the chugging of the tractor faded, the heat saturated her bones, easing her tension. The song of the grasshoppers stilled, too, as she drifted higher and higher into the ocean of blue.

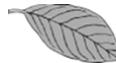
The clouds were close now, soft, billowing. She raced, exuberant, up and down cushioned white hills and tumbled on cloud pillows. Her dream castle soared before her, and she floated through halls and corridors that shimmered in soft luminescent white. From a high rampart she gazed down, down on the distant green and golden earth below.

The castle dissolved into a huge white dragon upon whose shoulders she rode as he glided earthward. Then she let go and spiraled up again like a feather. Could she go past the clouds to the rising moon? Follow the blue sky forever?

Below her, a flight of swallows eddied in the breeze; above, a hawk coasted on the warm, strong current. Ahead, the crescent moon gleamed silver amid a shoal of glittering stars. She reached out and touched them, their phosphorescence sifting through her fingers.

A low, insistent vibration shivered the stars to dust. Kathryn covered her ears as the thrumming swelled to a roar. Her bones had weight again, the straw teased at her skin. Rising on one elbow, she saw Gary driving the tractor toward the log bridge and the farmyard.

It couldn't be that late! But the sun had crept westward, and the shadows were lengthening. She slid down the straw stack and walked swiftly toward the house.



The aroma of roasting beef permeated the kitchen as she peeled potatoes. Beef from their own steers, she thought with pride, glancing out the window at the small herd grazing on the hill. Last year's potatoes from the cellar, fresh green beans from the garden.

There'd be roast beef and potatoes in town, though supermarket prices appalled her. It was the land she couldn't leave, the familiar contours of the fields and hills, the creek, the valley. She was part of the land; it nourished her body and spirit.

Gary came in, washed his hands at the sink and said, "I'll shower later. Have to change the oil in the tractor and grease the equipment after supper." He poked a piece of wood into the kitchen stove and banged the lid back into place. "What did you do this afternoon?"

"Not much," she said. "This and that."

"Yeah?" he said absently. He sat at the kitchen table and rolled a cigarette. "I was talking to

Hank yesterday. At the machine shop." He paused, lit the cigarette. "He offered me a job. Full-time. Good wages, too."

She stiffened, her silent protests beating like bird's wings against the bars of a cage. He stared out the window, his thin brown face tired, worry lines creasing his forehead. Her resistance wavered. "Do you really want to work for somebody else? Have Hank telling you what to do?"

He turned his head to look at her. "I get along with Hank okay. And it's only eight hours a day, Kathryn, five days a week. Like having a vacation after the hours I put in around here."

"I know. You work too hard."

"So do you," he said. "We sell this place, we'd have enough to buy a house with a big yard, with trees. You could still have your garden. We could go on a trip once in a while." He grinned wryly. "Hell, we could buy popcorn when we go to the movies."

She ached for him. But more for herself. It would be easy for him to walk away; he wasn't part of this land the way she was. Tears filled her eyes and she put down the paring knife and went outside.

A hawk cruised, black against the white clouds and blue sky. Late afternoon sunlight bathed the golden green of ripening wheat, the rustling willow fronds in the creek.

Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead against the house's worn, splintering boards, still hot from the sun, smelled the dryness of aging wood. In her mind she could see the soaring hawk, the cloud castle, the blue infinity of the sky. The earth reached out to her through the soles of her feet, whispered that her roots would never be torn away.

She looked up again. The hawk was gone, the castle dissolved to wisps, but the sky was still blue. She gazed at the farmyard, the creek, the fields, the valley curving away toward the northwest. It was part of her, deep inside, forever, like the sky dreams. As long as she lived, she'd feel the earth under her feet, talk to it with her hands.

Gary was still at the kitchen table when she went inside. He said nothing, but his eyes were questioning, his expression wary.

"This house you said we could buy in town, Gary, would it have big trees? Big enough that we could sling a hammock between two of them?"

LONG BEACH AT MIDNIGHT

Moonlit mist
veils a black and silent forest,
shrouds empty stretches of sand,
edges the white curl of the breakers
trying to drown this rock
I cling to.

This jagged, barnacled, treacherous
rock keeping me safe.
For the moment.

Voices call, ghosts in the mist
urging me nearer,
calling me down
to join those others
who lie silent, far below
the crashing thunder of
this mother of life.

Chill spray numbs my mind.
Nothing left
but mist, darkness, and the
cold savage roar of
this mother of death.

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

I always loved walking up Carol's driveway. The house, built in the 1920s, looked cozy and welcoming, with horse chestnut trees along the driveway and an enormous weeping willow in a back yard big enough for three houses. A lived-in house, too, with a cat and a dog, a pool table in the basement and people coming and going. It often felt more like home to me than my own house and Carol and I had talked about sharing it if we both ended up as widows. Not that either of our husbands seemed likely to die any time soon, but I thought about it sometimes and I was sure Carol did, too.

The first Saturday in June, when the leaves on the trees were a fresh, vibrant green, Carol's husband, Jack, was waiting for me, rake in hand, when I turned to walk up the final curve of the driveway to the veranda. "What do you think about throwing a surprise party for Carol's sixty-fifth?" he asked.

"That will never work, Jack. She'd catch on right away." And, loving food the way she did, she'd feel left out if she wasn't involved in the cooking. It was hard to believe that Jack was serious about his suggestion. But then, I'd known her a lot longer than he had. And a lot better.

When we told her we wanted to have a big celebration, she was all for it. I sent invitations to her relatives, even her former in-laws, and a lot of the people she worked with. I was excited about the party; she was my dearest friend and we'd been like sisters since our twenties, though far closer than many sisters I've known. Not that we lived in each other's pockets; we were both still working.

Carol decided the party was a good excuse for cleaning the whole house from top to bottom and on the last Saturday in June I walked over to her house, planning to spend the day helping, as I often did.

We hugged at the kitchen door. "I'm going to make cabbage rolls," she said, "some for lunch and some to freeze for the party, so we can have a good gab while you're doing the kitchen cupboards." I noticed she'd had her hair frosted again. I didn't like the way it looked, and I'd told her that a few times, but she was stubborn about some things.

I started on the tinned goods cupboard. "Is Mike going to make it down from Campbell River for this bash?" There was no need to ask about Carol's daughter, Kate, who lived only a few blocks away. She'd be there, with her three kids and her husband. They all adored Carol.

Her smile was one of deep pleasure. "He's taking a couple of days off and bringing the whole family." By which she meant Mike's wife, Marla, and their two young boys. Carol had always loved kids.

I didn't, but I'd cared for hers often enough that they sometimes called me 'Aunt.' It must have been thirty years ago, I thought as I scrubbed the shelves, the time I looked after Mike and her house while she went to a high school reunion in Regina. Her first husband had died by then and Kate was staying with one of Carol's sisters for a few days. Mike planned to go camping for the weekend and I lay in Carol's bed, listening to him stomp around in the basement below me, using all the four-letter words I'd ever heard, and some I hadn't, while he set up the tent to make sure he had the necessary bits and pieces. I'd felt a rare sense of contentment, listening to him, and a sympathy I had no intention of getting out of bed to voice, while I crossed my fingers under the blankets that the tent would cooperate.

Carol had come back elated over the reunion. I listened to her while I made supper for us and felt that contentment again. I'd been there for her, just like family. Sometimes, I thought, our

friendship was better than family.

She was fitting cabbage rolls into a baking pan. "Jenny, I've found a new Canadian author, Matt Hughes. He's really very good." Carol collected every Canadian author she could find, though I sampled what the whole world had to offer.

"I've never heard of him. What does he write?"

"Fantasy," Carol said, handing me a cup of coffee. "Take a break. You're not competing for fastest cleaner in the west. The book I'm reading is called *Fools Errant*. It's not full of elves and princesses; it's funny."

"Really? Fantasy is usually fairly serious."

"Not this one." Carol went into the living room and brought back the book.

I read the first couple of pages. "I see what you mean."

"I'll loan it to you when I'm through." Carol smiled. "Remember that Christmas we gave each other the same collection of Sharon Butala's short stories, because we both thought it was such a treasure? I was rereading a story in it the other day, the one called *Breaking Horses*."

"The one where the wife leaves her rancher husband?" I asked.

"You know, I've read that story half a dozen times and I still can't figure out if the wife was going to her daughter in Calgary or to Vancouver on her own."

"I think she was going to Vancouver."

Carol shook her head. "I wouldn't. I'd go to Kate and tell her what I was doing."

"Yes," I said, "but you've got a good relationship with Kate. And Mike, too. That woman's daughter in Calgary was the only one of her kids who ever wrote to her, and I didn't think the letter was very friendly."

"Makes you wonder how the daughter was raised, doesn't it?" Carol put the cabbage rolls in the oven.

For the next half hour Carol washed dishes and I cleaned the cupboard over the fridge, while we talked, as we often did, about bringing up children. Carol had the experience; all I had were memories of being raised in a troubled household, but we usually came up with the same answer.

I moved on to the spices and cooking ingredients. "It would make more sense if you moved these to a cupboard closer to the stove."

"I'm used to having them in that cupboard," she said, frowning.

I dropped the subject. Carol hated being reminded that my talent for organization was more developed than hers. "You know, I remember cleaning your cupboards once before, but I can't recall when it was."

She looked out at the apple trees beyond the carport, her hands still for a moment. "I do. Let's not go there."

Then it came back to me. That was the day she told me her period was late and asked me to find her an abortionist, back when having abortions was illegal. I knew she didn't dare have a baby, being unmarried at the time and living in the same town with two sisters, three brothers and her in-laws, not to mention needing to work to support the two kids she already had. By the time I'd got a name, a couple of days later, she didn't need him anymore and we both shed tears of relief.

Jack came in. "You girls got lunch ready yet?"

"Cabbage rolls in five minutes," Carol said.

"Good!" he said. "I'll go wash my hands and put on a clean shirt."

Jack was a fisherman and could curse in three languages, but at meals he was prim and proper as an old maid. Very different to my Peter, who was a lawyer and, though he dressed in a

suit and tie for work, refused to pay parking tickets, ate in front of the television, and occasionally cheated on his income tax return. We laughed a lot about our husbands, Carol and me. Not in a mean way, but they both had idiosyncrasies we found funny. And quite a few that we didn't.

"Is Jack still drinking?" I asked, while he was out of the room.

"A little, now and then," Carol said. "But if he starts going on benders again, I've got a 'never darken my door again' speech all ready."

"So have I."

"Things aren't that bad, are they? Don't leave him, Jenny, unless you absolutely have to. Security is important, especially when you get to our age."

Years ago, a man I'd been in love with for a long time, a man I hoped to marry, left me to marry someone else. Carol had provided scotch, tissues, and her attic bedroom to hide in. "Don't fret so," she'd said, "there's plenty more where he came from."

I wiped down a bottle of olive oil. That was true at thirty, but at sixty-five, the men have been pretty much picked over. If anything happened to Peter, I wouldn't go looking for another man, though. I didn't mind being alone and anyway, I had Carol.

"Sometimes security doesn't seem worth the price," I said.

"Even so."

We heard Jack coming downstairs and started discussing food, another passion we shared. It was too much of a passion, in fact, making new and bigger clothes necessary every couple of years. Still, it meant we could go on loaning each other blouses and slacks and go overboard in the second-hand stores, knowing that what one of us couldn't wear, the other would.

"I loved those quesadillas you made last weekend," I said. "Would you let me copy the recipe?"

"On one condition," Carol said. "That you bring me the recipe for barbecued spareribs you promised a month ago."

"I'm sorry! I completely forgot. I'll email it to you as soon as I get home." As Carol dished out the cabbage rolls, I remembered when we both worked at the same place and managed to spend a whole Sunday afternoon making clam chowder while we talked about our boss and the situation in the office, only to discover when we tasted the soup that we'd left out the clams. We still laughed about that.

Thinking about that office reminded me that we'd even shared a lover once. Well, not at the same time; I got him after she was through, and I didn't keep him either. That was when part of her job was answering the phone. She'd gone out for lunch, and I was at my desk working, so when the phone rang, I picked it up. A man's voice said, "Carol? I can't meet you tonight after all."

I knew his voice—and I knew he was married. "What shall we do then?" I didn't want to embarrass him by revealing that I wasn't Carol.

I don't recall what he suggested, only my amusement and pleasure that Carol and I sounded so much alike that he couldn't tell our voices apart. I was itching to tell him that he was lucky I was discreet. When she came back from lunch, I told her the new arrangements. She laughed and said they were fine, but didn't tell me anything else. In spite of my curiosity, I decided I didn't want to know the details. The less I knew, the less likely it was that I'd accidentally let a wrong word slip and get him in trouble with his wife. Or get Carol upset with me. Anyway, he had a reputation as a womanizer and I figured Carol was just out for a fling, so it wasn't all that important.

The three of us ate our cabbage rolls and Jack talked about the garlic he was growing for the garlic festival in October. Most of the time I didn't mind Jack. He could be funny, though like many men, he tended to think he knew everything. In the late afternoon, I went home to see what Peter was doing in our garden. He didn't object to me spending so much time at Carol's, but he generally stayed away; he and Jack didn't get on. After dinner, while I was rolling out pastry for tarts I could freeze for Carol's party, I thought about all the years Carol and I had shared and came up with a kind of poem.

Contrary to your expectations
and my fevered imagination
this is not a poem.
This is a love letter, a devotion,
placed gratefully at your feet.
Want me to ice a cake? A man?
Clean your cupboards?
Ask me anything.

I typed it out, slipped it into her birthday card and walked down to the corner to mail it. I didn't want to give the card to her on the day itself and run the risk of having one of her relatives grab the poem and read it aloud. There would be people there who knew what a poem was supposed to be, and they might laugh.

The party was noisy and fun. Kate had decorated the house with streamers and balloons, Mike insisted on passing the birthday cards around, and people congratulated Carol, not on reaching sixty-five, but on getting her gold card and how much money that would save her. My Peter dropped a piece of chocolate cake on the rug and finally I dragged him home before he passed out, though I hated to leave.

A couple of months later, Carol and I both retired. I'd expected to see a lot more of her then, but she was so involved with her grandchildren that it seemed like we actually spent less time together than when we were working. I knew how much she loved them, but now and then, when I wanted to sit and chat or go look at a new shopping mall and she said she couldn't because she was babysitting, I felt a bit left out.

Right after Christmas, Carol's son, Mike, was killed in a logging accident. She never cried in front of me, but I knew the wound was deep. I tried to get her to talk about Mike, but she said it hurt too much. I told her that if she couldn't talk to me, she should see a grief counselor.

"I don't need anybody telling me how to grieve!" she snapped.

I was quiet then, trying to control the trembling in my hands. I couldn't understand why she was angry. I knew her better than anyone, after all. Kids don't understand; they're too full of themselves and their own lives. Men, too. But I was her closest friend.

A year after that Peter died suddenly of a massive heart attack. Though the love I'd felt when we married had cooled considerably, it was still a shock. Carol helped me get myself sorted out and Jack took over the gardening until I could find someone to mow the lawn and do the heavy work for a reasonable price.

By the time Carol and I both hit seventy, I was enjoying widowhood. With Peter gone, I didn't have to answer to anybody. And Carol's grandchildren were now teenagers, mostly involved in their own lives, and she didn't see them so much. We had plenty of time to indulge in the pleasure of trying to figure out what made people tick. The town was growing and there were always new subjects to examine under the lens of our curiosity.

The really bad news came the following year. At my house, over tea, Carol told me she had

cancer. "But it's all right," she said. "I don't want you making a fuss, because once I have the operation and go through the chemotherapy and radiation, I'll be all fixed up good as new. There are so many things I want to do that I have to live to at least ninety."

Making a fuss wasn't our style anyway. But I had a strong feeling that she was going to die. I didn't know where the feeling came from, but I couldn't get rid of it, and it cast a dull gray light over everything. I'd even wake up at night sometimes, sweating, thinking I could hear her calling me.

After the chemo and radiation, she seemed fine. Her hair grew back, and she had enough energy to cook and even get involved in Jack's annual garlic festival. But the day she sat me down at her kitchen table and said the cancer had come back, I knew for sure she wasn't going to make it.

I didn't want her to have the chemo again; I didn't believe in it. "Why don't you try some of the treatments offered by alternative medicine?"

"You've told me that a dozen times, Jenny, and I know you're concerned, but I'm going to do exactly what my doctor tells me. I trust him completely. I'll be fine; I'm going to live to ninety and that's that."

Or die trying, I thought, and clamped my lips tight to stop the words coming out.

She went on talking about her doctor; it was obvious she didn't want to hear what I was saying. I tried to convince myself that her faith in him was the most important thing, that believing in the cure was the cure itself, but it didn't work. My nightmares got worse; I began dreaming that Carol and I were swimming in the ocean, and she was drowning. No matter what I did, I couldn't reach her in time to save her. And then the wind came up and the waves sucked me under, too.

But things went well enough for a few months. She didn't want any visitors the week after a chemo session and I stayed away, though now and then I saw one or the other of her sisters driving down the street toward her place. I was annoyed with them for barging in when she didn't want company, but I couldn't say anything. When Carol phoned to tell me I could visit, I'd go over right away and we'd sit in recliners across from each other, knitting and talking about people and books, just as we always had. She'd have the dog in her lap, and I'd have the cat in mine. Sometimes she'd drift into a nap, and I'd close my eyes, too. It was good to be with her, but the black cloud I could see hanging over her pressed down on my brain and squeezed my heart.

I wanted to talk about it, to know how she felt about dying. Death was an important event and, after Peter died, I'd given mine a lot of thought. I was comfortable now with the idea, though I certainly wasn't in any hurry for it to happen. I wanted to know that Carol was reconciled to dying, too, that she could face the inevitable, whenever it might happen, with her usual common sense and serenity.

One afternoon, hoping to direct the conversation, I said, "I finally got around to making a new will last week. Not before time, since Peter's been gone almost four years. I thought you should know I've left half to you and half to my niece in Edmonton."

She swung her legs off the recliner. "I'm going to make a pot of coffee. Would you like some peanut butter cookies?"

When she came back, she started telling me about the blue poppy she'd been looking for in nurseries for years and that Jack thought he'd finally found it. He was going to plant it for her on the weekend. She never said a word about my will. Or about her own.

It was like she knew that she was going to die soon and didn't want to face it, didn't want to think about it, didn't want to talk about it, even to me. I could feel tears burning the back of my

throat and an ache throbbing in my neck.

I tried again, a few days later, but got the same reaction. She ignored my question and changed the subject. I wondered what she felt about her first husband's death, about her son's death. Did she think that death was something that happened to other people if they were unlucky or careless, but couldn't happen to her?

Then, while I was away for three weeks helping my niece move house, Carol went into hospital for more treatments. When I got back, she'd come home from the hospital and was lying down, though she said she felt pretty good. It was almost like old times, the way we talked and laughed together, and I thought, as I tried not to notice the black cloud, that maybe she really had beaten it.

"I had an MRI, Jenny, but they don't have the results yet. I'm not worried, though." She grinned and said, "Jack talked his doctor into giving him an MRI, too. He was bound to do it, of course, because I'd had one." She always said Jack couldn't stand to be left out of anything. Maybe so, but I thought he might want to skip the dying part. And turned away, pretending to look at the bookcase, so she wouldn't see my face.

A few days later she was back in hospital, and I went to see her, but she couldn't talk because of all the drugs they were giving her. She'd get maybe three words out and forget what she was going to say. She couldn't even remember if Jack had been in to see her that morning. It bothered me that she seemed more interested in what was happening to the woman in the next bed than in me. When I left the hospital, I sat in my car and smoked a cigarette, never mind all the cars circling the parking lot looking for a space. I reminded myself that Carol was zonked out on painkillers. That tiny, cramped room, smelling of medicine, and the old woman croaking in the next bed probably seemed a lot more real to her than the outside world.

I desperately wanted to do something for her. The doctors were dealing with the physical pain so I thought it would help her to talk about what she was feeling, to come to an acceptance of death. We still talked about other people's lives, though it seemed a long time since she'd talked about her own. But, in spite of my hints, she avoided the subject of dying as though it didn't exist. I finally gave up. Her family was gathering around, and I thought maybe the best thing was to stay away and not add to the furor. She had always liked having private time to herself, but she obviously wasn't getting much. Though I yearned to be with her, I didn't want to invade what little she had.

When I phoned Jack a few days later to ask how she was, he said she'd been home for a week. He hadn't told me. Neither had Kate. Carol had come home to die, Jack said. She was lying in a hospital bed beside the window in the den where she could see the back lawn, the weeping willow, and little birds at the feeder.

That was where I saw her the last time. When the home care workers had gone, I breezed into the room like I always did, and said, "How are you?"

"That's a dumb question," she said, glaring at me.

Before I could explain that I thought she wanted me to act normal, a neighbor with two young girls came in. Carol concentrated on the two kids for the next half hour. After they left, we had maybe fifteen minutes before she started falling asleep. She wanted to know about my trip to Edmonton and complained about her lack of appetite, but nothing important got said. Not even goodbye.

Maybe there wasn't anything to say. I'd loved her for a long, long time and she knew that. I thought she felt the same about me, though now I wasn't really sure, and I wanted to hear it. I do know she was angry. Not at me, but at Death, at being cheated out of the twenty years she

thought she still had coming to her. She'd been a good girl and done everything the doctors had told her to do and the bogeyman got her anyway. I could see it in her eyes, in the set of her mouth and I wanted to take her hand and draw all that anger out of her so she could go in peace. But her face was closed against me.

When I walked out that day, I stopped beside my car and looked at the house, thinking about its books, the dog and cat, the cozy attic room that I'd slept in so often during the last forty years. The place felt like part of me. I backed the car out and stopped again to look at it, at the weeping willow and the old horse chestnut tree, the leaves turning yellow and rust as September drifted toward October.

I wanted to stay at the house and help so I could see Carol every day, but Jack kept saying not to come, that she was sleeping or too drugged to make sense. A week later Kate phoned to say Carol had died in her sleep the night before.

I couldn't cry, though there was an ache in my chest that doubled me over and I felt short of breath. I couldn't settle to anything; my feelings were all over the place, swooping up and down like seagulls fighting a winter wind. Sometimes I'd reach for the phone before I remembered she'd never answer it again. Then I'd remind myself that things were better this way because she wasn't suffering any more.

The black cloud that had hung over Carol was hanging over me. My mind was a torrent of random memories, a war between pain and relief, until I got so confused that I started wondering how I was supposed to feel. Which was foolish. I felt how I felt, but I couldn't get a grip on anything for long. Maybe because I wasn't there when she died. But even if I had been, would she have let me close to her?

Jack phoned to tell me what time the service was being held. I asked him if there was anything I could do to help and he said that Mike's widow, Marla, and Kate were taking care of everything. After he hung up, I cried. I wanted to be there, where she'd lived and died, where I could maybe accept what had happened. And what hadn't.

The day of the service it rained on and off, reflecting my mood. The church was full, the sermon mercifully short. I've always thought funeral services were mostly designed to make people cry, as though they needed any help with that. There was a reception in the annex to the church, the usual sandwiches and squares, coffee and tea. A table in the corner held photographs of Carol and her kids. Marla and Kate were there, and I said hello to them, but they were too busy with their own kids and their aunts and uncles to have a real conversation with me. Not that there was much to say; they knew, if anyone did, how much I'd cared for their mother.

Almost everyone had gone when Jack began gathering the family together. I heard him say something about going to the house for a drink and a surge of gratitude flowed through me. I desperately wanted to be in Carol's house, to see if I could feel her presence or try to get used to the idea that she was no longer there.

I joined them at the door. Jack said, "Thanks for coming, Jenny. Carol would have appreciated it."

"Don't mention it. And, Jack, I'll walk over. There's no point clogging up your driveway with my car."

He stared at me, then put a restraining hand on my arm. "No, Jenny, you misunderstood. It's only family that's invited back to the house."

LONELY LITTLE WHIRLWIND

Once upon a time a little whirlwind named Sam lived in a broad green field where black and white cows grazed, and yellow butterflies danced in the sunshine. Sam was a very tiny whirlwind, only as high as your knees, and he loved to play. But nobody seemed to see him, or want him to play, and he was very lonely.

Sam tried hard to make friends. He whirled across the field, teasing the grass. The blades bent down before him, hiding their pointed little heads. They whispered, "Go away, Sam, we can't dance!"

Then Sam saw a big, fat robin tugging at a worm. He was so excited he twirled right around the robin, knocking him flat. The robin squawked, "Bad Sam! You interrupted my breakfast!" and flew away.

Sam saw a cow close by. He rushed over and spun around her ankles. She kicked up her heels, nearly stepping on him, and said, "Moo! Mooove on! I'm busy."

Sam moped along, feeling sadder than ever because nobody wanted to play with him. Then he heard a zzzzzz. There was Liz, the honeybee, flying right beside him.

"Oh!" he cried. "Liz, you'll play with me!"

Away he whirled after Liz, dancing round and round her till she got dizzy and fell headfirst into a buttercup. She struggled to her feet and shook her wings.

"Sam," she zzzd, "I don't have time to play with you. I'm a very busy bee. I'm making honey for the winter." Sam's long arms, that he always kept wrapped tight around himself, drooped toward the ground.

"Now, now, Sam!" said Liz. "Don't cry. There's a Big World outside this field. You're sure to find friends there." With that, she zzzoomed off.

Sam was surprised. He'd thought the field was the whole world. The more he thought about what Liz the bzzzy bee had said, the more excited he became.

Still, it might be dangerous out there. He'd have to watch for signposts in case he needed to come back. When he felt brave enough, he whistled along the edge of the field, looking for a path to the Big World.

At first, he could see only big green bushes. Then he found a long lane with a gate at the far end. He whirled toward it, kicking up a little dust as he went, eager to see what the Big World was like.

He hovered just outside the gate, amazed at all the wonderful new things he could see. There were paved streets and sidewalks, houses and hedges, and huge trees with red and yellow leaves. Sam spun faster and faster, dancing down the street.

Then came a whooshing roar and Sam was knocked end over end. He reeled upright and blew the dust off himself. A big, black car rushed away down the street.

Frightened, Sam started to whirl back to his safe green field. Suddenly a rabbit popped out from behind a tree and twitched her nose at him. Sam forgot about being scared. He twirled around the rabbit, singing, "Dance with me! Dance with me!" The rabbit waggled its ears and dove into the hedge. Sam dove in after her.

Ohhhh! The sharp tangled branches in the hedge held him tight, scratching and tearing at him. "Help!" he yelled, but the rabbit just twitched her nose, waggled her ears, and vanished into another hedge.

Sam wailed, "Ohhhh!" He had to get loose before those sharp branches tore him to pieces.

He wound himself tighter and tighter until he was very small indeed, only as high as your ankles, and he popped out through a narrow opening between two branches.

He was so glad to be free that he forgot he was coiled tight like a spring. He spun out of control and went reeling down the street, bumping into trees and fire hydrants and telephone poles. "Oh!" he cried, "Ouch! Stay out of my way! Ohhhh!"

When he'd got himself unwound to normal size again, what a surprise he had! He was spinning with a crowd of autumn leaves, red and yellow, brown, and bronze, all of them whispering and laughing.

Sam whirled a little faster. The leaves stayed with him, dancing up and down. Sam dashed away down the sidewalk. Some leaves settled to rest, but others joined him. There were big leaves and little leaves, some crisp and talkative, others just fallen from the tree and wondering where they were.

Sam whirled and danced and laughed and twirled until he ran out of breath and had to slow down.

"Sam," rustled the leaves, "we're glad you found us. We love to dance! Will you stay and play with us?"

"Wait for us, Sam," whispered more leaves up in the tree. "We want to dance, too."

Sam swirled around the tree, happy as he could be. With so many wonderful friends, he'd never be lonely again.

CIRCLE DANCE

Morning, again.
Hungover, again.
Mouth dry and bitter
with self-reproach.

I shower away
last night's foolishness,
swear by two aspirins:
never again
never again

Move carefully through the day,
speak softly, skirt the issues,
keep my thoughts on a leash,
avoid the mind-fields.

Five o'clock.
Soul scraped bare. Again.
I repeat the mantra:
sit and rest, meditate.

No. I'll have a smoke.
One won't hurt.
And one drink before dinner
will make me feel so good.

GRAND SLAM

"Seven spades."

"Double."

"Pass."

"Pass."

"Redouble!" A smug smile accompanied Laurene Jones' triumphant bid. It was clear she thought making seven spades would be a snap.

A grand slam, doubled, redoubled and vulnerable. If Laurene made her contract, she and Marion would win the rubber and be up 3,140 points. That was as many points in one hand as I usually made in a whole afternoon of bridge.

My partner, Emily, stared at her cards as if wondering why she'd ever had the temerity to double Laurene's bid, then gazed out my living room window at the log booms in the rain-lashed inlet and beyond to the Coast Range. The view of forested mountains apparently offered no inspiration, for she sighed and examined her cards again.

Laurene was always full of herself, but when she made a doubled contract, she crowed so much that I wanted to take a dull knife to her tongue. There can be grace in winning as well as losing, but Laurene's grace was restricted to her perfectly coiffed blonde hair, her perfectly matched ensembles and her perfectly kept house. Oh yes, and her expertly brewed coffee and exquisitely baked brownies.

"It's your lead, Emily," I said. "And don't worry. We're not playing for money."

Emily led the heart deuce. Marion laid out the dummy hand, slid her chair back, and rose.

"Where are you going?" Laurene demanded.

"Bathroom break." Marion's smile was strained. She hated listening to Laurene brag as much as Emily and me, but she usually managed to be gracious.

"Come and see what I have in my hand," Laurene said, "and watch how I handle the play. You need to learn more about strategy."

Marion, the youngest at forty, pushed her red hair back over her shoulders, smoothed her silk shirt over the hips of her Levis and went dutifully to stand behind her partner's chair, too gracious even to thumb her nose at the back of Laurene's head.

Laurene paused after each trick, whispering to Marion about the clever play she'd just made and the even cleverer play she intended to make next. Emily and I knew because she'd done the same thing to us, more times than we wanted to remember. The hand seemed to go on forever.

"If you've got all the tricks, why don't you lay your hand down and claim?" I asked.

"That would be a waste of a good teaching hand, dear. I want to play it right through to the end, so Marion can see how to do a squeeze play."

In fact, she simply wanted to torture us. We all knew how to do a squeeze play, a simple matter of playing all your winners and forcing the defense to discard until they could no longer protect their good cards and had to discard those as well.

Laurene made the grand slam, of course. Her bridge was impeccable, like her life. She wrote the 3,140 points on her score pad, beaming as though she'd won a lottery, and said to Emily, "What on earth possessed you to double me?"

"The bidding indicated that you could be missing an ace and I thought Barbara might have it." Emily, at seventy-three, was the senior member of our foursome, her speech as precise as her tweed suit and severe chignon of grey hair. A true lady, my husband often said.

"And you had nothing in your own hand that could take a trick? Really, Emily! You must base your bids on logic, not wishful thinking." Laurene rose. "Barbara, do you want help in the kitchen?"

"No, no," I said hastily. "Everything is ready." The last place I wanted her was in my messy kitchen, finding out I'd purchased the dessert from a bakery. Emily is a lady, Marion is gracious, I am a slob.

I brought the tray of coffee and brownies and we moved to easy chairs to nibble and rehash the three rubbers we'd played.

As usual, Laurene took center stage. She swallowed a delicate bite of her brownie, wiped her mouth carefully so as not to smudge the rose-pink lipstick that matched her pant suit, and said, "Ladies, I've said this before, but it bears repeating. To play bridge properly, you must keep your minds fit, just as you should exercise and diet to keep your bodies fit." She glanced at me. "Barbara, have you started that diet I gave you?"

"No chance. We've had company all week." To tell the truth, I'd ripped it up and tossed it in the fire as soon as I came home from our last bridge session.

"You'll never reach your ideal weight if you allow yourself to be distracted, Barbara. It's like playing bridge. You must concentrate on your goal."

"I've always thought of bridge as a game," Emily said. "A challenging game, to be sure, but fun to play. I'm afraid I don't wish to regard it with the same seriousness as conducting a war."

Laurene reached for another brownie. "Barbara, these are quite good, but they do need a little something. Perhaps each one topped with a maraschino cherry?"

I have always hated maraschino cherries, but not as much as I hated Laurene at that moment. "I'll try that next time."

Laurene demolished the rest of the brownie without dropping so much as a crumb. "The goal in bridge is to win the most points. If you don't play to win, why bother playing?"

"I do play to win," I said, "but I make mistakes, like everyone else."

"You wouldn't if you dismissed every thought from your mind except the hand being played." Laurene returned her serviette to its original folds and put it on her plate. "Barbara, when I have time, I'll show you how to fold serviettes into marvelous shapes. Such touches add so much elegance to formal dinners."

"Thank you," I said, gritting my teeth. Elegance in my house consists of using serviettes rather than paper towels. In Marion's house it means sitting at the table to eat rather than in front of the television. In Emily's, a three-course meal rather than a sandwich.

"You played that grand slam very well," Emily said. Conversation about anything other than bridge, books or birdwatching usually bores her but I was surprised at her giving Laurene another chance to show off.

"Thank you. By focusing on the hand, I realized I could make it by doing a squeeze play, thus avoiding the need to finesse for the diamond queen. All three of you would play so much better if you focused properly."

"Well, of course we're not perfect," Marion said with a straight face, kicking her shoes off and curling her jeans-clad legs under her in the corner armchair.

"But you could be," Laurene went on. "You could learn to bid and play as well as I do. Why don't you come to my bridge classes at the church hall on Tuesday evenings?"

"My book club meets on Tuesdays." Emily crumpled her serviette. "I couldn't miss that."

"You could get the day changed if you learned to use psychology," Laurene said. "That's what is needed for bridge, too. With practice, you can train yourself to interpret facial expression,

tone of voice and even hesitations in bidding and play."

Laurene rose and paced the room as though she were lecturing her class. "Now, Emily, try to get your book club to change its meeting night. Next week I'll be teaching strategy. Playing the right card at the right time is essential to winning."

I was itching to toss my cold coffee in her face and wreck her flawless makeup, but Emily and Marion were being such exemplars of politeness and forbearance that I felt ashamed of my impulse.

Laurene glanced at her watch and gave a tidy little shriek. "Oh dear, I must be going. I'm teaching a class on cake decorating at four." She buttoned and belted her raincoat and added, "I just love living in little towns like this. There's so much one can do to improve life in them."

After the front door closed behind her, the three of us looked at each other. "I'll go get the coffee pot," Marion said. "We've all been out of school a long time and I, for one, don't feel like going back. We have to do something about that woman."

"But what can we do that won't jeopardize our husbands' jobs?" I trotted into the kitchen after her to fetch the pan of brownies.

"The unfortunate part of living in a company town in a remote logging area," Emily said, when we were settled with fresh coffee, "is that one's social life is so limited. I'm lucky my husband is retired. I can offend anyone I please."

Marion and I couldn't. Both our husbands were in shaky management positions, reporting directly to the new superintendent, Laurene's husband. It was well known that Winston Jones intended making drastic cuts to management. Winston and Laurene had only been in town three months and already Laurene haunted our nightmares as much as Winston haunted the men's.

"Remember how much fun we had playing bridge when Sally was the fourth?" Marion bit into another brownie. Sally was the previous super's wife and Laurene had bulldozed her way into Sally's social life right down the line.

"It was wonderful," I said. "She never snickered or bragged when she trumped somebody's ace."

"Let's not waste time with regrets," Emily said, sitting up straighter than ever in her chair. "We must find a way to deal Laurene out of our bridge life so we can find a fourth who enjoys the game and doesn't have to be right all the time. Is there any chance Winston will be transferred?"

"Harvey overheard Winston say he'd rather be in head office in Vancouver," Marion said, "but that it probably wouldn't happen."

"Well, you know Laurene," I said. "She wants to be a big toad in a small puddle, and she probably runs Winston's life, too."

Emily pursed her lips. "I'd suggest her as chairperson of the library committee and the PTA in order to keep her too busy for bridge, but I'd hate to subject my old friends to such a horrible fate."

"It wouldn't work anyway," Marion said. "She'd never quit our foursome; every week she gets to win points against three imperfect victims. And I don't mean just bridge points." She picked up one shoe and hurled it across the room. It landed on a pile of newspapers and knocked them over. "When Laurene's finished one of her lectures about how I should have played the hand, I want to say to her, 'Laurene, please break wind again. I love the smell of roses.'"

"I want to do more than that," I said. "When she leans over and pats me on the shoulder and smirks while she's telling me what I did wrong, I'd like to kill her."

Marion and Emily looked at each other, then at me. Marion got up and headed for the liquor

cabinet. She pulled out a bottle and turned to hold it up. My best scotch. Emily went to the kitchen and brought back three glasses and a tray of ice cubes.

"All right, let's focus on psychology." Marion poured a generous splash of scotch into each glass. "And let's not forget concentration and perfect strategy and perhaps even a squeeze play or two."



The following week Marion and I arrived at Emily's house fifteen minutes early for our bridge session. We put our trays of brownies beside Emily's on the kitchen counter. In each of the three pans, one brownie sported a maraschino cherry nestled in thick chocolate icing.

"Did you phone Laurene?" I asked.

"Yesterday." Emily smiled as she prepared the coffeemaker. "She's thrilled about the contest. She said she'd have no problem judging which brownie is best."

"Thrilled to death, I hope," Marion said. "I don't know how I'm going to get through three rubbers of bridge with the state my mind's in."

"You must learn to concentrate on the game, my dear," I said, mimicking Laurene's tone and accidentally knocking a knife off the counter.

Emily took my hands in hers. "I would suggest you take a couple of aspirins, Barbara. That might stop your hands trembling."

"Could I have a shot of scotch instead? And some fresh mint to chew afterwards?"

Before Emily could get the scotch, the doorbell rang. Laurene opened the door, ushered herself into the living room and sat at the bridge table. "Ready to play, girls?" she trilled, sweeping the cards into a perfect semi-circle so that we could cut for deal.

I was amazed at how smoothly we cut the cards and took seats opposite our partners. Mine was Emily for the first rubber and it comforted me to see her calm face across the table. My nervousness receded, curling itself into a twitching, aching lump in my stomach.

Naturally Laurene drew the highest card and dealt the first hand. "It's a shame you all missed my Tuesday class," she said, snapping the cards down with the precision of a drill sergeant. "I discussed strategy. For example, you may use any legal ploy to mislead your opponents, such as false discards, or looking worried when you know perfectly well how to play the hand."

"I think I'll practice looking worried today," I said. Marion kicked my foot.

Marion, who was Laurene's partner, opened the bidding with one heart. Laurene raised it to four hearts and promptly got up to lean over Marion's shoulder and supervise her play after I led the ace of spades. Marion looked grim but she made an overtrick.

"You should have led another spade for Emily to trump," Laurene said to me. "Weren't you counting the cards? You could have prevented us taking the overtrick."

"I forgot to count anything but trumps."

Laurene shook her head, a sorrowful look on her face.

It took less than two hours to stumble through our usual three rubbers and, to no one's surprise, Laurene garnered the most points. "I was at the top of my form today," she said. "I'm certainly ready for the brownie contest."

Emily carried in the three maraschino-topped brownies on three delicate china plates of different design and put them on the end table beside Laurene's chair. Marion served coffee. I sat twiddling with my cup and wishing I were somewhere else. Anywhere else.

"These look lovely," Laurene said. "Did you all use the same recipe?"

"No," Emily replied. "We thought it would be more interesting if we each tried something different."

"Ah, but that will make them more difficult to judge. You should have thought of duplicate bridge, where all the partnerships play exactly the same hands. It's an excellent approach because no luck is involved, only skill. Winston and I adored playing duplicate when we lived in Vancouver. I have almost a thousand master points, you know."

We knew.

Laurene picked up the brownie from the plate with pink roses and took a bite. She chewed slowly, raising her gaze to the ceiling as if communing with her taste buds by long distance. I tried to go on breathing; it was my brownie she was eating.

"Hmm. Tasty, though perhaps a little dry." She dabbed at her lips with a serviette and sipped coffee before attacking the brownie on the bluebell plate. Marion shifted restlessly in her chair.

When the second brownie had disappeared down Laurene's throat, she said, "Acceptably moist, but the chocolate was rather overshadowed by peppermint. The use of artificial flavoring requires a light touch, girls."

The third brownie was on a daffodil plate. Laurene tasted it, frowned, tasted it again. My palms were sweating. "At first I thought there was far too much sugar in this one, but there is an underlying bitter tang. Perhaps unsweetened chocolate? Interesting, though." She finished the brownie and held out her cup as a hint she was ready for a refill.

"So, give us the word," Marion said. "Which brownie takes the prize?"

Laurene smiled. "Definitely the second one. It had the proper moist texture and the right chocolate smoothness. Go easy on the peppermint next time, though."

"Congratulations, Marion," Emily said, pouring second coffees for all of us.

Marion rose, gave a mock curtsey, and took a brownie from the plate Emily had placed beside the cream and sugar on the coffee table.

"Oh, but girls," Laurene said, "where are your maraschino cherries? Those brownies are plain."

Emily's face went pale. I said quickly, "No one likes them but you, Laurene. We put them on yours as a special treat. As a reward for judging, you might say."

"Well, aren't you sweet," she said. "They do look delicious, even without the cherries. But I'll pass. Winston and I are guests of honor at the Rotary Club dinner tonight. I mustn't ruin my appetite."

Twenty excruciating minutes later, Laurene finally put her coat on.

"I should leave, too," Marion said. "Harvey and I are going to the movies tonight. American Beauty is on. The one that won all the Academy Awards, remember?"

Laurene stood in the open doorway, smiling. "You'll love the movie. And you'll never guess the ending. Kevin Spacey's character gets shot." She left, and Emily waved at her from the front window as she drove away.

Marion, face red, slammed her fist on the coffee table, bouncing the brownies on their plate. "Not only did she ruin the movie for me, but now I'll have to sit through it while Harvey watches." She shoved a brownie in her mouth and bit down as if it was Laurene's neck. "And to think that for a moment there I was regretting this brownie caper."

We retreated to the kitchen to help Emily wash cups and plates. "Barbara, what did you put in your brownie?" Marion asked, drying the same cup for the third time.

"Amanita mushroom. The death angel."

"I used methanol and a lot of peppermint essence to cover the taste. What about you,

Emily?"

"Mashed ripe privet berries. And a great deal of sugar to hide the bitterness." Emily polished the sink. "I was so afraid she'd catch on when she asked about the cherries. Thank you for your quick thinking, Barbara."

"I was terrified she'd eat a fourth piece and find out it tasted different yet again from the others," Marion said. "For sure she'd have wanted to know why."

"It doesn't matter," Emily said. "Now we just have to wait. Two of those poisons take several hours to work."

"A grand slam," I said, "doubled and redoubled, if all three work. Will you pour me a scotch, Emily? Waiting will be the worst of all. What if she finds out? What if the police find out?"



By ten the following morning, I was such a wreck that I invited myself to Emily's for coffee and moral support. Marion arrived a few minutes later.

"I'd put some Drambuie in the coffee," Emily said, "but if anyone comes asking questions, it won't look good if we're all drunk before noon."

We settled into our usual soft chairs, drank the rocket fuel that Emily calls coffee and gazed out the window at the clear-cut scarred mountain. There seemed to be nothing to say. Twenty minutes later the phone rang.

Marion and I listened as Emily murmured, "Oh, dear," and "I'm so sorry," not once, but several times. When she hung up, she said, "Our grand slam didn't work."

The blood drained from my face and the starch from my knees. "What do you mean, it didn't work?"

Emily patted my hand. "It's all right, Barbara. Laurene was killed on the way home from her cake decorating class yesterday afternoon. A logging truck rammed her car into that stone wall the other side of the bridge. The car was crushed almost flat and, fortunately, she died instantly. Then the car burst into flames and the firemen had a terrible time putting it out. Laurene's body was virtually destroyed."

"Oh my God, we're in the clear," Marion said, a trace of hysteria in her voice.

"Yes," said Emily thoughtfully. "Apparently Winston is going to lay criminal charges before he goes back to Vancouver."

Marion's face paled to ghastly grey, and her voice quavered. "Why? Who? Emily, what are you saying?"

Emily smiled. "Winston is going to charge the truck driver. The man said Laurene was weaving all over the road and driving on the wrong side."

"That would be the privet berries." I clutched my coffee mug in shaking fingers. "They're supposed to take a couple of hours or less."

Emily nodded. "Winston is sure the man is lying; he says Laurene was always in the right."



REALITY CHECK

The surging sea takes many lives.
I think I'll give it mine.

The waves are heartless, cold,
like my lover's eyes.
They'll take me down
and end this endless pain.

Cruel pebbles bruise my tender skin.
The water rises, chills my blood,
sucks my breath,
tugs at my feet.

Wait.
Not so fast.

I'll come back when it's warmer,
and wear shoes.
Sometime.
Maybe next year.

A MUSE FOR MICHAEL

Michael squinted down at the tiny house, a white plaster square of brilliance nestled into the rocky hillside. It stood alone, fifty feet from a small turquoise bay, the empty sea beyond rippling dark blue under a steady breeze. The only sound was the distant cry of a gull skimming the water. The man in the taverna had been right; the house was exactly what he needed. And if the gods were gracious enough to send a Muse to guide him, he'd be able to realize his dream of staying in Greece forever.

He emptied his pockets of breadcrumbs for the birds chattering in the olive grove, hefted the heavy pack onto his back and walked on, kicking up puffs of dust with blistered, sandal-shod feet. Hiking boots would have been more comfortable but, for the sake of his novel, he was determined to experience life here as the ancient Greeks had known it.

Over a small rise, he saw a bigger house, right where the taverna owner had told him it would be. An old woman, dressed in black from kerchief to voluminous skirt, pulled weeds in the garden. Beyond the house a girl in similar clothes chivvied a herd of goats into another olive grove. A thrill of pleasure made him catch his breath. The setting was ideal.

"Kala mera!" he called. His Greek was fluent, though deficient in modern idioms. But he would pick up those quickly enough.

The old woman returned his 'good morning', ducked her head at him and went into the house. In a moment, an old man came out and stood waiting for him to thread his way through the clucking hens in the yard.

"I wish to rent your cottage," Michael said, pointing toward the little white house hidden beyond a low hill.

Over coffee and sweet cakes in a bare, primitive kitchen, they agreed on a price. For a small additional sum, the old woman promised to supply him with eggs and vegetables and do his cleaning.

"You will have company," she said.

"Company?" Surely she couldn't mean that he had to share the cottage with someone.

The old woman smiled. "A cat. Her name is Thalia. She prefers to live at the cottage."

"Oh, I don't mind cats." Half an hour later, he was in his dream house, unpacking his things, wandering from room to room to stare out the windows, thinking about a swim, his mind a blur of possibilities.

Next day the old woman, Annis, came at eleven, bringing eggs, tomatoes, and a loaf of bread. "I will be here every day at this time."

"You needn't come so often," he said, thinking of the interruption to his writing, to the flow of his thoughts. He had plans for a whole series of novels, a ten-book saga that would reveal to the non-academic world the glory of ancient Greece, the birthplace of Western civilization. The first book was going well, two chapters completed before he left home, but he had to write quickly. When his money ran out in a few months, he'd need the advance a publisher would pay.

Annis came out of the bedroom, a broom in one hand, a photograph in the other. "This is your family?"

He winced. He'd found the photo in the bottom of his pack—his mother must have put it there—and he'd stuck it face down in a pile of books.

"Yes, my parents and me. That's our house." He disliked photographs of himself, fair skin, blond hair flopping over his forehead, one eye blue, the other hazel. Nothing like the hero of his

novel, Keril, who had black hair, fiery brown eyes, and a solid, muscular physique.

"Very nice," Annis said. "Beautiful home. You are lucky. But no brothers and sisters? That is a shame." She went to the kitchen and came back with a thumb tack. "I will put the picture on the wall, here above your table, where you can see it every day. Family is everything."

When the woman had gone, he rolled a sheet of paper into his portable typewriter, almost an antique now but small enough to carry in his pack. A sudden yearning for the desktop computer he'd left at home gave rise to an even stronger pang of guilt. Living like the ancient Greeks meant no electricity, no running water. No typewriter, either, but there was little choice about that; his handwriting was impossible to read.

He was still irritated about the snapshot. If he took it down, Annis would make a fuss; he could tell by the way she talked that she was as stubborn and persistent as his mother. He decided ignoring the photograph would be easier than putting up with the old woman's questions.

He had been typing for only a few minutes when he felt a prickling on the back of his neck, as though someone were staring at him.

A lean, dark tabby sat in the open doorway, examining him with slanted yellow eyes. This must be the cat Annis had mentioned.

"Thalia?"

The cat lifted a paw and licked it.

"Well, Thalia, let's make an agreement. If you don't bother me, I won't bother you."

The cat strolled toward him, leapt onto his table, and nosed at the sheaf of notes beside the typewriter.

"No!" Michael said, his voice harsh. He put the cat on the floor. Tail lashing, the cat jumped to the windowsill and sat there staring at him.

Michael stared back for a moment, debating whether or not to put her outside. He shrugged and turned back to his work. She was only a cat. He need not pay her any attention.

Next day the girl who had been herding goats came to him, eyes downcast. "My name is Callista," she said. "I am granddaughter to Demetri and Annis."

He nodded and went outside. If these women persisted in coming every day to clean, he would go walking for an hour; he could not concentrate when someone else was in the house. These peasants gave background authenticity to the setting, but he had no reason to talk with them.



Michael pushed the blue kitchen chair away from his wooden worktable, tidied the litter of books and papers and stretched his arms above his head. He gazed at the rough white plastered walls, the canvas deck chair that served as his reading refuge, the stacks of books against the wall, and finally at the casement window. He walked over and leaned his elbows on the broad sill. Two framed panels opened outward, the glass flawed and pitted, breaking the sunlight into shimmering distortions. For a moment he stared at these unseeing, his mind still mired in the half-finished eighth chapter of his novel.

The novel was taking far too long; six weeks had slipped by already. The ancients had talked with the gods and received gifts from them. Why shouldn't he ask for a Muse rather than wait for them to notice him?

A skittish breath of wind riffled the smooth surface of the sea. At dawn tomorrow he would plead with the goddess Aphrodite. He must swim tonight, purify his body, and prepare his mind,

do everything exactly right so she would be sure to hear him.

Thalia leapt to the sill and rubbed against his arm. He stroked her, pleased that she seemed to like his company. She hunted early in the morning and late at night, but expected to share his lunch at noon. At other times she sat on the windowsill or on his writing table and stared at him with those disconcerting yellow eyes. If he was in a good mood, he'd let her stay. If not, he'd put her outside and shut the door. She always came back, eventually.

Michael turned toward the back of the house and brushed through the curtain of wooden bead strings into the kitchen. The beads clicked together with a faintly hollow sound, which at first had irritated him, and he'd intended to take the curtains down or loop them back out of the way. After a day or two of procrastination, he reminded himself that such curtains might have been used thousands of years ago, and now he was used to the sound, even finding it musical.

He took a ripe tomato from the sunlit windowsill, bread, olive oil and ham from the cupboard and made a sandwich. The cat wound about his ankles, meowing hoarsely.

"Shut up, Thalia," he said, out of habit, and scraped half a tin of tuna into her dish. He took his meal out to the stone slab at the front door and sat in the sun, his back against the door jamb, and ate his sandwich while the heat sent sweat purling down his temples. He crumbled the crusts and tossed them into the shade of the lemon tree for the sparrows that sang for him there every day.

The little bay was blue-green, translucent, nearly motionless and the sea stretched flat and empty under the scorching light. Tonight, the fish boats would go foraging again, their lights floating over the water like drifting stars.

Sometimes he heard goat-bells, or a dog barking up in the hills, or the echo of a man's shout, but now only the chirp of cicadas broke the silence. Even the birds slept during siesta time, the air heavy with heat and sea-smell and silence.

He glanced up at the white contrail drifting across the sky. If it wasn't for that symbol of modern life, he could almost believe he was living nearly twenty-five hundred years ago, with Pericles ruling in Athens, the time and place of his novel. But the contrail didn't matter, so long as he could live a simple life here, as the ancients had. So long as he didn't have to go back to teaching Classics to bored university students in Vancouver and give in to his mother's pressure to marry and raise the prescribed two point five children.

He had gone to Delphi before coming here. All through the years of studying Greek history, the ancient myths, the bloody wars, he had dreamed of the day he would stand on Delphi's sacred ground and gaze upon the graceful, fluted columns and the steep, forbidding hills whence came the prophesies of Apollo. When he finally arrived, dusty and hot, backpack dragging at his shoulders, eager to breathe in the cool and revivifying grace of sacred air and ask his question of the oracle, he found the holy places desecrated by tour buses.

Hundreds of people profaned the temples, the arena, the treasuries. They sat on fallen columns, drinking beer, eating sandwiches, chattering. Tour guides with megaphones spoke English, German and French, their voices echoing from the hills. The spirits of the past must have fled long ago.

Delphi had been a sour disappointment, like Athens with its pollution and swarming cars. But this place was perfect. He had needed silence and solitude, the joy of breathing the same air, swimming the same sea, as the ancient Greeks. Now he had it. For as long as he liked, old Demetri said. If only he could get these books written, and sell them, he'd be able to stay forever.

A swim or a nap? Or just sit and imagine who might have lived here, dreaming of old wars, while Pericles gave his orations in Athens? Would the man have paid attention to the huge,

blood-red geranium blooms sprawled on the crumbled wall beside the house, or the lemon tree spreading its leaves of slender shining green, the fruit turning now from green to sharp yellow? Behind the house, up the slopes of serried hills to the misty blue of the mountains, lay silver-green olive groves, dark, brooding cypress, glowing yellow splashes of gorse, here and there a red tiled roof and the glint of sunlight on glass. What was that sound in a distant olive grove? Pan, his goatish figure prancing in dappled shade while he piped to a coterie of wood nymphs?

The nap won. He rinsed his plate under the tap beside the front door. The water ran down a little stony trough beside the lemon tree and disappeared into the ground.

He went in and closed the heavy pine door behind him. It was cooler inside the thick-walled house. He took a black olive from a bowl in the cupboard and bit into it, mouth-watering at the sour-salt taste. The shelves were almost empty. He'd have to walk up to the village for food in the next day or so. Tomorrow he'd ask for more vegetables from the woman who came to clean. Perhaps she'd bring him a stew, as sometimes happened.

He hoped his money would last until he received an advance on the first novel. Otherwise, he'd have to find work. Probably Athens; not likely anyone around here would pay him to herd goats or wait tables in the taverna.

He clenched his hands in the pockets of his shorts and willed his mind to be quiet. The novel was good; his plea for a Muse would work, *had* to work.

He flopped on his mattress on the bedroom floor and set the cat on his chest. Thalia would have none of it, squirming and writhing in Michael's hands. He let her go. The cat stalked away, stretched out on the relative coolness of the stone tiles, blinked yellow eyes at him and went to sleep. After a time, Michael too fell asleep, and dreamed that the cat would obey him.

That evening, before he swam, he stood on the beach and looked up at his small, solid house, his sanctuary, the whitewashed plaster dazzling in the slanted sunlight. The last rays of the sun reverberated among the darkly silvered leaves of the olive trees, and he turned, hopeful, and plunged into the silken bay. The first shock of cold water faded as he swam out to the point. By the time he returned to the rocky shore, he felt as one with the sea, dreaming of dolphins he had never seen.

Later he picked his way along the beach in moonlight, losing himself in the mysterious whispering of the water, unable to decipher the words he knew were there, listening for the voice of Aphrodite. Would she come to him?

Just before dawn, he woke to the sleepy chirping of birds in the lemon tree. He dressed, rinsed his hands and face under the tap, and hurried down the rocky path to the bay. The water seemed alight, as though it had stored yesterday's sun against the darkness of night.

There he built an altar from beach rocks, a small cairn with a flat rock for the top, and laid on it a stalk of geraniums just coming into bloom. He sat on his heels beside the altar and whispered, "Aphrodite, sweet goddess, grant my wish."

He saw her as the first rays of light silvered the breathless sea. She glided across the bay toward him, filmy gown billowing behind her, long golden hair gleaming, jeweled girdle emphasizing the swell of her hips. Silence thundered in his ears, and he knelt, trembling, suddenly afraid, blinking his eyes against the blinding light that shone about her.

"Why do you disturb me, foolish mortal? What do you want?"

His mouth dry, he whispered, "Success for my books telling of your glorious past. A Muse, goddess, a Muse to help me write."

She towered above him, her radiance engulfing him, setting his flesh on fire. "And if I grant it?"

He bent his head. "I will adore you forever."

Her laughter filled the bay. "And so you shall, mortal, whether you will or not. Your life and dreams are not my concern. You have your Muse. Be content."

He blinked and she was gone.

Michael struggled to his feet, knees weak, heart thumping against his ribs. He had called on Aphrodite and she had come.

He stripped and plunged into the welcome chill of the water. When he came out, Thalia was prowling the shingle and tumbled rocks, edging a few steps into the water, and investigating, with deceptively fragile paws, anything that moved. Michael called her and climbed up the path toward the house, but the cat continued fishing.

Dried and clad in cotton shirt and shorts, Michael surveyed his kingdom from the stone step. Blood pumped rhythmically through his veins, his skin was cool and tingling. Sparrows sang and swooped through the freedom of the clear air; the sea was like blue crystal. From the hills came faint echoes of the great armies, the stories of the past. He went inside and began to type.

A knock at the door near midday brought a rasp of irritation. The words were flowing, and he hoped it wasn't Annis, who chattered and asked questions so that he could not get away from her.

It was Callista, barefoot, her kerchief gone, shining black hair streaming over her shoulders. He stared, realizing he'd never noticed her olive complexion, the warm flush in her cheeks, the voluptuous curves under her peasant skirt and blouse.

Michael stumbled to his feet and took from her the sack of vegetables. How had she known to bring them?

She moved into the room and Thalia, with a hiss, leapt down from the windowsill and ran outside.

"Grandmother says you are writing a novel about ancient Greece." It was the first time he'd heard her say more than a muttered 'kala mera.'

In spite of himself, the words tumbled out, describing the story. He was afraid that she would, like so many people back home, ask stupid questions. But her questions were apt, her voice as musical as her flowing hair. When she left, carrying his laundry, he was astonished to find that they had talked for an hour. And even more astonished that one of her comments had given him an idea for a plot problem that had worried him for days.

It was not until late that night, exuberant over the spate of words flowing through his fingers into the keyboard, that he saw the truth. Callista was his Muse! And she was beautiful, as befitting her name.

He took flowers, olives, and grain to the altar on the beach and knelt before it. "I give you thanks, Aphrodite," he murmured. "Efharisto, glorious goddess, I owe everything to you." He promised to bring a gift every night.

Every day now Callista came, instead of Annis, and they talked about his book, the characters, and historical details. Even when her suggestions did not work, her presence refreshed his mind. Often, she made his lunch and left something for Thalia, for the cat would not come inside when Callista was there. Soon they began swimming together at dawn. They would emerge as the sun rose and he grew to treasure the moment when she stepped ashore, rainbow beads of water cascading over the warm brown of her skin.

One sleepy noon, he reached out and caressed her cheek, almost afraid that she would vanish at his touch. The gods could be cruel and unpredictable. But she smiled and let him draw her into his arms. Later, lying together on his mattress, he whispered, "My sweet Callista, my Muse."

"I must go," she said. "Grandmother will wonder what I am doing." She smiled down at him as she dressed. "Work well; I will see you at dawn."

When she had gone, he resisted the urge to sleep the afternoon away and returned to his worktable. Thalia sat beside the typewriter, her half-lidded gaze seeming almost a reproach. Annoyed, he dropped her to the floor, and she stalked away, tail whipping back and forth.

The weeks drifted by like a dream, in a cradle of blue sky, sunshine, salt sea. Michael wrote, swam, wrote, made love, and wrote into the night. The book was going well. Callista began cooking his supper, moving silently in the kitchen as he bent over the typewriter. She would put his plate on the table beside him, kiss his cheek and slip away. Each night he gave thanks and a flower to the goddess.

Near noon one hazy August day, he heard a squawk and looked up to see Thalia march purposefully through the door with a sparrow in her mouth.

"Thalia!" He jumped up. "Let it go!"

With a quick snap of her jaws, Thalia bit through the bird's spine and dropped the body at Michael's feet.

Michael stood with fists clenched, rage making him inarticulate. The cat, like Aphrodite, had brought him a gift but he had not asked for this one. He kicked the bird outside, willed his muscles to relax and turned to the window. The land smelled of sage, birds soared through the blue air as though nothing had happened, sunlight fell on the shimmering ocean. He returned to the typewriter.

A little later he heard voices nearing the cottage. Perhaps Annis was coming today to see if Callista was taking good care of him. But the door opened on a crowd of people. Demetri and Annis entered first, smiling and nodding. Then a shabbily dressed middle-aged couple Callista introduced as her parents from Athens. Then two young men, her brothers, and their wives. Two uncles and an aunt. They crowded into the tiny house and Michael stood, awkward, in the center. There was no room to move.

"Is this a party?" he asked.

"Yes!" someone shouted. Then they were all laughing together, making quick little comments that he couldn't quite catch.

When the laughter was done, Demetri says, "We have come to arrange about the wedding."

"Wedding? Whose wedding?"

Callista smiled at him and rubbed her belly. "I am making a little Muse for you."

Her father stepped forward. "I have spoken to my friend at the university in Athens. There is a teaching job waiting for you, to begin next month. And Stefano has found you an apartment near the Acropolis. I think you will find everything to your satisfaction."

Stefano produced a bottle of Metaxa brandy. "Find glasses, Callista. We drink to you and the lucky bridegroom! And to the many little ones to come."

In the one second of silence that followed, Michael heard, like a far-off echo, the mocking laughter of the goddess. And saw, on his worktable, Thalia lifting her tail to spray his typewriter, insolent golden gaze piercing his collapsing dreams. As Callista handed him a glass of brandy, the cat leapt to the windowsill, out the open window, and vanished.



SEPTEMBER

Flaming maple leaves crisp and die
among dark, funereal firs.
Mist-drenched spider webs shackle
the frosted grass.
Beneath a smoke-hazed polished sky
geese, with brazen alarm,
escape southward.



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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover

Siamese Summers

Cat Under Cover

Cats & Crayons

Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier

Charger the Weapon

Charger the God

The Missing Year

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay

Deep Water

Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising

Red Blood Falling

Shockwave

A Clear Eye

Double Image

Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest

Walking the Windsong

Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail

Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

About this book

Dig into a quirky harvest feast of short stories and poems! This West Coast cornucopia offers a wide range of nature and human life. In the prize-wining speculative story *Guardians*, nature reclaims its primacy in an unexpected manner, while in *Fishing Expedition*, the financially beleaguered narrator applies an unusual lesson from birdwatching. In *Grand Slam* the characters learn even the best laid plans 'gang aft agley,' and the hero of *A Muse For Michael* learns, perhaps too late, to be careful what he wishes for. The poetry combines images with keen observation in the tradition of *haiku* to offer a fine finish to this banquet of obsessions, dangerous secrets, and unique snapshots of our human condition.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

